NIVAC BUNDLE 4: MAJOR PROPHETS

APPICATION APPICATION COMMENTARY

From biblical text...to contemporary life

JOHN N. OSWALT
J. ANDREW DEARMAN
IAIN M. DUGUID
TREMPER LONGMAN III

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How to Use This Commentary

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NIV Application Commentary

Series Introduction

THE NIV APPLICATION COMMENTARY SERIES is unique. Most commentaries help us make the journey from our world back to the world of the Bible. They enable us to cross the barriers of time, culture, language, and geography that separate us from the biblical world. Yet they only offer a one-way ticket to the past and assume that we can somehow make the return journey on our own. Once they have explained the *original meaning* of a book or passage, these commentaries give us little or no help in exploring its *contemporary significance*. The information they offer is valuable, but the job is only half done.

Recently, a few commentaries have included some contemporary application as *one* of their goals. Yet that application is often sketchy or moralistic, and some volumes sound more like printed sermons than commentaries.

The primary goal of the NIV Application Commentary Series is to help you with the difficult but vital task of bringing an ancient message into a modern context. The series not only focuses on application as a finished product but also helps you think through the *process* of moving from the original meaning of a passage to its contemporary significance. These are commentaries, not popular expositions. They are works of reference, not devotional literature.

The format of the series is designed to achieve the goals of the series. Each passage is treated in three sections: *Original Meaning, Bridging Contexts*, and *Contemporary Significance*.

Original Meaning

THIS SECTION HELPS you understand the meaning of the biblical text in its original context. All of the elements of traditional exegesis—in concise form—are discussed here. These include the historical, literary, and cultural context of the passage. The authors discuss matters related to grammar and syntax and the meaning of biblical words. They also seek to explore the main ideas of the passage and how the biblical author develops those ideas.

After reading this section, you will understand the problems, questions, and concerns of the *original audience* and how the biblical author addressed those issues. This understanding is foundational to any legitimate application of the text today.

Bridging Contexts

THIS SECTION BUILDS a bridge between the world of the Bible and the world of today, between the original context and the contemporary context, by focusing on both the timely and timeless aspects of the text.

God's Word is *timely*. The authors of Scripture spoke to specific situations, problems, and questions. The author of Joshua encouraged the faith of his original readers by narrating the destruction of Jericho, a seemingly impregnable city, at the hands of an angry warrior God (Josh. 6). Paul warned the Galatians about the consequences of circumcision and the dangers of trying to be justified by law (Gal. 5:2–5). The author of Hebrews tried to convince his readers that Christ is superior to Moses, the Aaronic priests, and the Old Testament sacrifices. John urged his readers to "test the spirits" of those who taught a form of incipient Gnosticism (1 John 4:1–6). In each of these cases, the timely nature of Scripture enables us to hear God's Word in situations that were *concrete* rather than abstract.

Yet the timely nature of Scripture also creates problems. Our situations, difficulties, and questions are not always directly related to those faced by the people in the Bible. Therefore, God's word to them does not always seem relevant to us. For example, when was the last time someone urged you to be circumcised, claiming that it was a necessary part of justification? How many people today care whether Christ is superior to the Aaronic priests? And how can a "test" designed to expose incipient Gnosticism be of any value in a modern culture?

Fortunately, Scripture is not only timely but *timeless*. Just as God spoke to the original audience, so he still speaks to us through the pages of Scripture. Because we share a common humanity with the people of the Bible, we discover a *universal dimension* in the problems they faced and the solutions God gave them. The timeless nature of Scripture enables it to speak with power in every time and in every culture.

Those who fail to recognize that Scripture is both timely and timeless run into a host of problems. For example, those who are intimidated by timely

books such as Hebrews, Galatians, or Deuteronomy might avoid reading them because they seem meaningless today. At the other extreme, those who are convinced of the timeless nature of Scripture, but who fail to discern its timely element, may "wax eloquent" about the Melchizedekian priesthood to a sleeping congregation, or worse still, try to apply the holy wars of the Old Testament in a physical way to God's enemies today.

The purpose of this section, therefore, is to help you discern what is timeless in the timely pages of the Bible—and what is not. For example, how do the holy wars of the Old Testament relate to the spiritual warfare of the New? If Paul's primary concern is not circumcision (as he tells us in Gal. 5:6), what *is* he concerned about? If discussions about the Aaronic priesthood or Melchizedek seem irrelevant today, what is of abiding value in these passages? If people try to "test the spirits" today with a test designed for a specific first-century heresy, what other biblical test might be more appropriate?

Yet this section does not merely uncover that which is timeless in a passage but also helps you to see *how* it is uncovered. The authors of the commentaries seek to take what is implicit in the text and make it explicit, to take a process that normally is intuitive and explain it in a logical, orderly fashion. How do we know that circumcision is not Paul's primary concern? What clues in the text or its context help us realize that Paul's real concern is at a deeper level?

Of course, those passages in which the historical distance between us and the original readers is greatest require a longer treatment. Conversely, those passages in which the historical distance is smaller or seemingly nonexistent require less attention.

One final clarification. Because this section prepares the way for discussing the contemporary significance of the passage, there is not always a sharp distinction or a clear break between this section and the one that follows. Yet when both sections are read together, you should have a strong sense of moving from the world of the Bible to the world of today.

Contemporary Significance

THIS SECTION ALLOWS the biblical message to speak with as much power today as it did when it was first written. How can you apply what you learned about Jerusalem, Ephesus, or Corinth to our present-day needs in

Chicago, Los Angeles, or London? How can you take a message originally spoken in Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic and communicate it clearly in our own language? How can you take the eternal truths originally spoken in a different time and culture and apply them to the similar-yet-different needs of our culture?

In order to achieve these goals, this section gives you help in several key areas.

- (1) It helps you identify contemporary situations, problems, or questions that are truly comparable to those faced by the original audience. Because contemporary situations are seldom identical to those faced by the original audience, you must seek situations that are analogous if your applications are to be relevant.
- (2) This section explores a variety of contexts in which the passage might be applied today. You will look at personal applications, but you will also be encouraged to think beyond private concerns to the society and culture at large.
- (3) This section will alert you to any problems or difficulties you might encounter in seeking to apply the passage. And if there are several legitimate ways to apply a passage (areas in which Christians disagree), the author will bring these to your attention and help you think through the issues involved.

In seeking to achieve these goals, the contributors to this series attempt to avoid two extremes. They avoid making such specific applications that the commentary might quickly become dated. They also avoid discussing the significance of the passage in such a general way that it fails to engage contemporary life and culture.

Above all, contributors to this series have made a diligent effort not to sound moralistic or preachy. The NIV Application Commentary Series does not seek to provide ready-made sermon materials but rather tools, ideas, and insights that will help you communicate God's Word with power. If we help you to achieve that goal, then we have fulfilled the purpose for this series.

The Editors

^{1.} Please note that in general, when the authors discuss words in the original biblical languages, the series uses a general rather than a scholarly method of transliteration.

ISAIAH

THE NIV APPLICATION COMMENTARY

From biblical text . . . to contemporary life

JOHN N. OSWALT



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General Editor's Preface

ONE OF THE DIFFICULTIES of applying the wisdom of Isaiah to the perplexities of twenty-first-century life is audience. It always seems as if Isaiah is talking to someone else. Let me explain.

Isaiah, son of Amoz, spends much of his writing time relating visions of destruction and visions of blessings about the divided nation of Israel and her surrounding neighbors. Listen to some of the subject headings the NIV editors scatter throughout the book: "A Rebellious Nation" (Isa. 1); "Judgment on Jerusalem and Judah" (ch. 3); "Woes and Judgments" (ch. 5); "Assyria, the Lord's Instrument" (ch. 8). The list goes on and on through the sixty-six chapters of the book.

Admittedly this can make for exciting reading, particularly if you enjoy hearing about other people's problems. But it is difficult to see what the Lord-defying words and deeds of Israel have to do with us. One of the great strengths of this commentary on Isaiah, written by John Oswalt, is that he shows how to read this book—that is, how to avoid reading it solely as a chronicle of others people's problems and to see instead how it relates directly to us. Put another way, even though Isaiah seems to be warning a country that has an immoral domestic and foreign policy, at a deeper level the warnings and judgments are for you and me.

So how are we to read this book in a way that best communicates God's message to us?

- (1) Expect to hear God's voice to us in Isaiah's words. This means bringing one's faith to a reading of the text. When Isaiah tells Israel to "go into the rocks, hide in the ground from dread of the LORD and the splendor of his majesty" (Isa. 2:10), it may not be necessary to load up your backpack and head for the Colorado Rockies. But it is necessary to expect that in that admonition there is a message for me.
- (2) Recognize that the message is not in narrative prose but is embedded in visions, oracles, metaphors, and allusions. Isaiah was not a straight-talking prophet; he was a poetic prophet. Look at the way the type is laid out on the pages of your Bible. It looks like poetry. Only rarely in the pages of Isaiah do you see the blocks of type we associate with the narrative portions of the Bible or with other books we read.

In order to understand this kind of writing we need to think about why someone chooses to write in poetic form. The most important reason is that poetry is best at communicating the sort of wisdom that our culture makes it difficult to hear.

(3) Notice that a subtle shift takes place in Isaiah that moves us away from seeing these visions as oracles aimed directly, solely, at the nation of Israel. To see this shift, a little history reminder is in order. Most of the people of Isaiah's day (including the Israelites) were henotheists by upbringing. That is, they were used to thinking of gods as tribal gods. Each tribe, each people group, had their own god. The question was not primarily whether those gods were real (the assumption was that they were). The real question was whose god was the most powerful.

Contrast that with the way we look at God today. Most of us today assume that God is strong; our focus is on God's relating to individuals, not to groups of people. As a result, many modern exegetes of Isaiah think that the subtle shift apparent in Isaiah is from viewing the gods as tribal gods to viewing God as the God of individuals. Perhaps. There is no question that the image we end up with in taking the Old Testament texts as a whole is not henotheistic but monotheistic, a righteous God concerned about individual persons.

But the *real shift* in Isaiah is toward a view of God as the Lord not of just tribes, not of just individuals, but as the Lord of all:

This is what the LORD says:
"Heaven is my throne
and the earth is my footstool.
Has not my hand made all these things,
and so they came into being?" (Isa. 66:1–2)

God reigns over all. Let the Lord be glorified that we may see your joy.

Terry C. Muck

Author's Preface

IT HAS BEEN A SPECIAL PRIVILEGE to be able to write a second commentary on the book of Isaiah, one that focuses particularly on contemporary application. This task has proven more arduous than I originally anticipated, and the reader must judge how successful I have been. Nevertheless, it has been a profitable exercise for me and has left me with an even deeper appreciation for the prophet Isaiah and his towering accomplishment. He has written a book that is no less pointed and relevant in its application to the present than when it was first written 2,700 years ago. He has left his mark—and more importantly, God's mark—on the world, and that mark will last until the end of time.

Having said that, I am conscious of how often I have only been able to scratch the surface of the depths contained in it. It is profoundly humbling to be able to get a glimpse of the wonders contained within the words of the prophet and then be able to express them only in part. But I have expressed them as well as I can, and I gratefully leave the result to God.

I want to express my thanks to the trustees of Wesley Biblical Seminary, who granted me a research leave during which the bulk of the writing was completed. I also want to thank Terry Muck and Andrew Dearman, who read the manuscript carefully and made valuable suggestions. The editors at Zondervan, Jack Kuhatschek and Verlyn Verbrugge, were also unfailingly helpful.

Then there were my prayer partners—Sam Biebers, Stuart Kellogg, Daniel Koehn, Keith Megehee, and James Wolheter—whose prayers carried me along through the project.

Finally, I want to acknowledge Karen, my wife and life partner, without whose unfailing love, encouragement, and care none of what I have done would have ever happened.

Abbreviations

AB Anchor Bible

ABD Anchor Bible Dictionary. D. N. Freedman et. al., eds. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

ANET Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament. J. B. Pritchard, ed. 3d ed. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969.

BAR Biblical Archaeology Review

BDB F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1959 reprint.

BHS Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia

BKAT Biblischer Kommentar: Altes Testament

BST The Bible Speaks Today

BZAW Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

CB The Bible in Contemporary English

CBC Cambridge Bible Commentary

CBQ Catholic Biblical Quarterly

ConBOT Coniectania biblica, Old Testament

ETL Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses

EvQ Evangelical Quarterly

FAT Forshungen zum Alten Testament

FOTL Forms of the Old Testament Literature

HKAT Handkommentar zum Alten Testament

ICC International Critical Commentary

Int Interpretation

ITC International Theological Commentary

JB Jerusalem Bible

JBL Journal of Biblical Literature

JETS Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society

JPS Jewish Publication Society

JSOT Journal for the Study of the Old Testament

JSOTSup Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series

LXX Septuagint

MT Masoretic Text

NASB New American Standard Bible

NCBC New Century Bible Commentary

NDBT New Dictionary of Biblical Theology. T. D. Alexander and B. Rosner, eds. Leicester, Eng.: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000.

NICOT New International Commentary on the Old Testament

NIDOTTE New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis. W. VanGemeren et. al., eds. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.

NIV New International Version

NIVAC The NIV Application Commentary

NLT New Living Translation

NRSV New Revised Standard Version

OBT Overtures to Biblical Theology

OTL Old Testament Library

POT De Prediking van het Oude Testament

REB Revised English Bible

RSV Revised Standard Version

SBLDS Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series

SBLMS Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series

SBLSP Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers

SJT Scottish Journal of Theology

SOTMS Society for Old Testament Study Monograph Series

ST Studia theologica

TDNT Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, eds. Trans. G. W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976.

TDOT Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament. G. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, eds. Trans. D. Green et al. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974—.

TLOT Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament. E. Jenni and C. Westermann, eds. Trans. M. Biddle. 3 vols. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997.

TOTC Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries

VT Vetus Testamentum

VTSup Vetus Testamentum Supplement Series

WBC Word Biblical Commentary

WTJ Westminster Theological Journal

ZAW Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

ZBK Züricher Bibelkommentare

Introduction to Isaiah

Across the Years Isaiah has come to be known as "the prince of the prophets." A part of the reason for this title is the possibility that the prophet was a member of the royal family. While there is no indisputable evidence of this, the easy access to the kings that he seemed to enjoy may point in this direction. But the real basis of the claim is the nature of the book known by Isaiah's name. There is a majesty in the book that sets it off from almost any other in the Bible. It contains an unparalleled sweep of theology, all the way from creation to the new heavens and new earth and from utter destruction to glorious redemption.

The book's view of God is equally comprehensive: He is the austere Judge who decrees destruction on a rebellious people, but he is also the compassionate Redeemer who will not cast off a hopeless and despairing people. Nor are these ideas merely presented one after another and then left behind. Rather, they are interwoven in artful ways that suggest the symphonic art that appeared in musical style two millennia after Isaiah. Motifs appear, disappear, and reappear in ways that keep the thoughtful reader involved in an active dialogue with the writer.

Along with this intricacy is a style that moves back and forth from sonorous to lyrical. Chapters 6 and 40 are very different, yet they share the same spare, economical use of words, which makes them both memorable and effective. They have both a power and a beauty that make them unforgettable. Isaiah 52:13–53:12 is a different type of literature, but it is also an example of a style that matches beauty and power.

In many ways the book of Isaiah is the Bible in miniature. Like the Bible, the book has two major divisions, and like the Bible the main theme of the first part is judgment and the main theme of the second is hope. Beyond this, all the main themes of the Bible can be found in Isaiah. Though the Sinai covenant is not mentioned explicitly, it is everywhere assumed. It is the basis of the charges of rebellion, and it is the essential ground of the supposed relationship between God and Israel. The Davidic covenant is mentioned, and it is the foundation of the promises of the Messiah. If the house of David has failed, God's promises have not. Here the whole question of the uniqueness of God vis-à-vis idols is explored more completely than in any other book of the Bible. And it is here that the glory

of the Davidic Messiah and the shame of the Suffering Servant are brought together in a way that helps the New Testament picture of Christ make sense. So whether Isaiah was actually of the royal house or not, it is true that his work, in its theological sweep, towering vision, and powerful language, sets him apart as a prince among the prophets.

Historical Background

ALONG WITH THE princely qualities of the book are several conundrums. One of these is the fact that it seems to be addressed to at least two, and perhaps three, different settings. The first of these is that of Isaiah's own times, from about 740 to 700 B.C. But chapters 40–55 seem to be addressed to the Judean exiles in Babylon between 585 and 540 B.C., and while the evidence is less clear than it seems to be for the preceding two divisions, chapters 56–66 seem to reflect conditions in Judah after the return from exile in 539 B.C.

On the face of it, this seems odd. No other book of the Bible does this. Several speak *about* future times, but no other seems to speak *to* future times as Isaiah does. This is one of the chief reasons why it has become common in scholarly circles to consider that the book is the result of several different authors, with those involved in writing the second two divisions having lived in those times. While it is not impossible that the book is a composite, the book itself seems to make every effort to deny that conclusion, naming only one author throughout and giving no clues as to the life-settings and places of the other supposed authors (see below on Authorship and Date). Nor, if predictive prophecy is granted to be possible, is it out of the question for Isaiah to have understood enough of the general outline of future conditions to have addressed persons in those settings.

But if we grant that Isaiah is responsible for the entire book, why would he have written to future generations as well as his own? Since the Bible itself does not offer an explanation, we cannot give a definitive answer. But there is a plausible possibility. In chapters 6–39, Isaiah is given a sweeping vision of God's absolute superiority over the nations of the earth. All of history is in his hand, and he is able to deliver those who trust him out of the hands of the nations. This was climactically demonstrated in the deliverance of Jerusalem from Sennacherib narrated in 37:36–38. However,

Isaiah is permitted to see the future, a time when Judah will not be trusting God in the face of the Babylonians and when the Babylonians will devastate God's city and remove God's people far from the land he promised to them. What then? Will not future events have invalidated what Isaiah was given for his own day?

Furthermore, Isaiah sees that though there is a return from exile (predicted in the naming of his son Shearjashub ["Only a Remnant Will Return"]), it will be to vastly different conditions from those that pertained before the destruction of the city. Judah will simply be a backwater in the vast Persian Empire. Judah will have no king, no army, and no independence, and it will be faced with a much more subtle danger to their distinctive faith than the outright hostility of the Assyrians and Babylonians, namely, a syncretistic outlook that encouraged them to see their God as only a local manifestation of a universal deity worshiped by all religions.

Is it not possible that God gifted Isaiah with the ability to see the future of his people in order to show them (and us) that God *is still* superior to the nations and their gods (see 40:15–24) even if circumstances and situations are vastly different from those in which the original revelation was given? Is God the Lord of Babylon even if Jerusalem is not delivered out of Babylon's hands? Yes! Is God still the Lord of Judah even if he, because of her sins, has had to drive Judah from the land he promised her? Yes! Is it possible to experience the kingdom of God even if there is no kingdom of Judah? Yes! Is Judah's God the Lord of the nations even if Judah herself is no longer a nation? Yes! If the book had ended at chapter 39, we the readers would have had an incomplete picture of God. We would not have known that God's true lordship of history is not to be found merely in his ability to direct its events, but perhaps even more so in his ability to respond to events in such a way that his original strategy can remain unchanged. Not only is he the King of history; he is also the Redeemer of history.²

740-700 B.C.

BETWEEN 900 AND 609 B.C. the nation of Assyria was the single most prominent force, both politically and militarily, in the ancient Near East. Operating from their home base on the middle Tigris River in Mesopotamia, they had spread their domination in all directions, but

especially southward to Babylon and the other southern Mesopotamian citystates and westward and then southward toward Egypt. The small nations on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea stood in the way of this latter advance. Assyria had to go through them to reach the ultimate goal of Egypt because the sea stood on the west and the desert was on the east.

Furthermore, these small nations constituted rich prizes in themselves, having amassed wealth through agriculture, natural resources, and trade. Recognizing the threat, the small nations had formed a coalition to fight the Assyrians at the city of Qarqar in northern Syria in 853 B.C.³ The outcome of the battle seems to have been inconclusive. The southward thrust of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser seems to have been slowed, but it was by no means stopped since he continued to press southward during the remaining twenty-five years of his reign. His two immediate successors continued the same aggressive policies.

All of this put immense pressure on the kings of Israel and Judah in the century between 885 and 785 B.C. Much of their time and wealth had to be devoted to attempts to deal with the Assyrian threat. But beginning in 782, there were three Assyrian kings who were less aggressive.⁴ The third of these died in 745. This meant that for about forty years prior to 745, Judah and Israel had enjoyed a respite. Coinciding with this respite, and perhaps also because of it, both nations enjoyed unusually long and stable reigns. Israel was ruled from 793 to 753 by Jeroboam II, while Judah was ruled from 792 to 740 by Uzziah (Azariah).⁵ Since it was possible to devote time and resources to things other than defense, both nations experienced a time of wealth and prosperity unlike anything since the days of Solomon.

But all that came to a crashing close with the accession of a new Assyrian monarch in 745 B.C. This man, Tiglath-Pileser III (2 Kings 15:29, called Pul in 15:19), inaugurated a new period of Assyrian aggressiveness that was to continue right up until the final disappearance of the Assyrian Empire a century and a quarter later. Suddenly everything changed. Now the predictions of imminent destruction of Israel, which Amos and Hosea had made earlier and which had seemed so far-fetched at the time, did not seem far-fetched at all. Undoubtedly the death of Jeroboam II in 753, the almost immediate assassination of his son, and the subsequent chaos of succession contributed to the sense of impending doom. It seems clear that the kingdom of Israel was ruled for at least a dozen years between 752 and

740 by two kings simultaneously, with the warlord Pekah ruling in the Transjordan area until he could take complete control in 740.

In Judah also there was a change of kingship at this time, although it was not accompanied by the chaos found in the less-stable north. Here, Uzziah was succeeded in 740 by his son Jotham, who probably had been acting as coregent with his father for some ten years before Uzziah's death. Nevertheless, in spite of a greater stability on the throne, Judah could not help being embroiled in the wrenching crisis. By 740 the region north of the Sea of Galilee had been taken from Israel, and almost all that was left of Syria was the capital city, Damascus.

Desperate for some way of stopping the juggernaut, Israel and Syria conceived of another coalition (2 Kings 16:5–6; Isa. 7:1). None of the small countries on the Mediterranean coast had a hope of standing up against the Assyrians alone, but perhaps together they could at least achieve as much success as they had gained at Qarqar a century earlier. By this time (ca. 735) it appears that Jotham had been forced by a pro-Assyrian group in Judah to accord his son Ahaz a coregency. In fact, Jotham may have been effectively replaced, because Ahaz is the one acting as king at this point.

Undoubtedly, the call for a coalition against Assyria placed Ahaz in quandary as to whether he was a pawn of a pro-Assyrian party. To take a stand against Assyria had serious consequences if the stand proved to be futile. Whatever else the Assyrians were, they were ruthlessly efficient. Their armies showed both a higher level of organization and of armament than had been known previously in the ancient Near East, and their policies were equally well thought out. There was no lenience offered to those who insisted on opposing them, for the simple reason that such lenience might prompt others to run the risk of such opposition. To oppose the Assyrians and fail was to be subjected to as much destruction and terror as the Assyrian mind could conceive and the Assyrian might could carry out. Sieges were costly and time-consuming. If enemies could be convinced to surrender by looking at what previous enemies of Assyria had undergone, it was all to the good.

So Ahaz king of Judah had to weigh his options carefully. If he agreed to go with Pekah of Israel and Rezin of Damascus and they failed, there was no question that he himself would die by torture in as slow and as agonizing a death as possible and that his city would be systematically destroyed and his people scattered across the empire. But if he would not join the coalition, Israel and Syria would attack him; and if they were successful, they would depose him and put someone else on the throne who would be amenable to their plans (someone named "the son of Tabeel," according to Isa. 7:6). There was yet another option: He could actively throw in with the Assyrians and ask them to help him as their vassal.

This latter option is what Ahaz chose. He sent a large sum of money to Tiglath-Pileser and asked for protection from his two enemies (2 Kings 16:7–9). If this seems to us at this distance as though three mice are having a fight and one of them is asking the cat for help, we must remember that Ahaz's political options were limited. But what Ahaz seems not to have taken into account was God. Ironically, the way in which the Bible presents the account is that Pekah and Rezin had already failed in their attempt to take Jerusalem before any intervention from Assyria occurred. If Ahaz had considered God's plans and promises, he might have saved himself a great deal of money.

At any rate, Tiglath-Pileser, perhaps using some of Ahaz's funds, succeeded in capturing Damascus in 732. With this fortress no longer posing a danger in his rear, the Assyrian conqueror was free to push on through northern Israel and on down the coast toward the Philistine cities. Initially Hoshea, Pekah's successor on the throne of Israel, submitted to the Assyrians and paid tribute to them (2 Kings 17:3–4). But, predictably, he wearied of that burden. Thinking he had procured help from the Egyptians, he stopped paying the tribute in 726 or 725. This was early in the reign of Shalmaneser, Tiglath-Pileser's successor, and it was fairly common for vassals to revolt in the early years of a reign, hoping that an emperor would have too many other things to attend to in order to prosecute a rebellion. If that was Hoshea's hope, it was a vain one, because Shalmaneser successfully besieged Samaria and captured it in the year of his death, 722.

By this time yet a third successive coregency seems to have taken place in Judah. This time it appears that the anti-Assyrian party was in the ascendancy and had forced Ahaz's son Hezekiah on him.⁷ Hezekiah was sixteen by the time of Samaria's fall and seems to have stepped forward to attempt some sort of rapprochement with the Israelites who remained behind after the deportations (2 Chron. 30:1–11). Perhaps the reality of the Assyrian threat had now come home to the Judeans and Ahaz's influence

was on the wane. At any rate, it seems clear that from the outset Hezekiah pursued a policy that reasserted Judah's dependency on God and a refusal to consider any kind of a surrender to the Assyrians.

This was, of course, a high-risk position, as outlined above. With Samaria gone, the Assyrians, now led by Sargon II, pushed farther south and attacked the Philistine cities on the Mediterranean coast with impunity. By 715 the last of them had fallen. However, Sargon was not able to push immediately ahead to Egypt because for the next ten years he was plagued by revolts and incursions on his northern border, and apart from occasional punitive raids in the south was unable to follow up on his advantage. During this time Hezekiah was able to carry out his religious reforms and to fortify his country. It also appears from the book of Isaiah that there was considerable pressure among Hezekiah's counselors for him to ally Judah with Egypt. Undoubtedly Egypt was pushing hard for this too. They could read the signs as well as anyone else. Sooner or later Assyria would be knocking on their door, and by now only Judah, the remnants of the Philistines, Moab, and Edom were left to stand in the way of that eventuality.

Finally Sargon died in 705, perhaps on the battlefield. He was succeeded by his son Sennacherib, who was shortly (703) faced with a rebellion in Babylon. The leader of this revolt was from Chaldea in extreme southern Mesopotamia. His name was Marduk-apal-idinna (the Bible's Merodach-Baladan, Isa. 39:1). It seems probable that the events described in Isaiah 39 took place some time prior to this revolt as Merodach-Baladan sought to persuade others across the empire to join him in revolt. Whether that is the correct interpretation or not, it is clear that sometime in 703 or 702 Hezekiah led his neighbors in open revolt to the extent of capturing a Philistine kinglet named Padi and imprisoning him in Jerusalem.

Having dealt with the Babylonians, Sennacherib turned his attention to the west and, in the words of Byron, "came down like a wolf on the fold." In short order he brought the hard light of reality to bear on the ephemeral dreams the coalition may have had of actually being able to stand up to the Assyrian might. The promised Egyptian help evaporated, the leading Philistine city of Ekron was captured, and the towns and fortresses of Judah (forty-six of them in all) were captured and destroyed. Only Lachish, southwest of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem itself remained. Hezekiah turned

over Padi and sent a large present to Sennacherib, apparently in the hope that Sennacherib would be mollified and return home.

That was not to be the case, however. Sennacherib destroyed Lachish and made it clear he was not going home until the rebel city of Jerusalem opened its gates to him, either willingly or forcibly. He could ill afford to do anything else. There was the military problem. He could not proceed with the attack on Egypt with an enemy stronghold at his rear in position to cut his supply lines. But more importantly, there was the political problem. Hezekiah was the leader of the revolt. Assyria did not allow leaders of revolts to live. If it did, there would be no end of trouble. So Jerusalem had to fall and Hezekiah had to die.

In fact, that is not what happened. Sennacherib does not tell us why. In his own annals, he only boasts that he shut up Hezekiah "like a bird in a cage" and that Hezekiah paid him a huge tribute, agreeing to renew it annually. So Sennacherib returned home and, as far as his records indicate, never campaigned in the west again until his death at the hands of his own sons twenty years later. The door to Egypt, the prize for which Assyria had been straining for almost two hundred years, stood open, and Sennacherib did nothing to go through it. Instead, he was content to fill his palace with huge reliefs of the fall of Lachish. Having been denied the prize, he made do with second or third best. What happened? The Bible gives us the answer in Isaiah 37:36–37. One night most of the Assyrian grand army died at the hand of "the angel of the LORD," and Sennacherib decided he had more pressing business at home.

625-540 B.C.

THE ASSYRIAN EMPIRE eventually reached its Egyptian goal under Sennacherib's successor, Esarhaddon. When Esarhaddon's son, Ashurbanipal, came to the throne in 668, Assyria stood at the apex of its power and glory. Yet within less than twenty years of Ashurbanipal's death in 627 B.C., the Assyrian Empire would cease to exist. What happened? A number of factors were involved, but chief among them was the resurgence of Babylon. Relations between Assyria and Babylon had always been tense, with the Babylonians regularly attempting to break free. For two hundred years Assyria had always been able to regain control, but with Ashurbanipal's death that control was lost irrevocably.

Ironically, Assyria may have contributed to Babylon's success this time by having decisively defeated Babylon's enemy Elam during Ashurbanipal's reign. At any rate, in the upheavals surrounding Ashurbanipal's succession, a Chaldean general named Nabopolassar took the throne of Babylon and set about driving the Assyrians out. Within ten years he succeeded in this goal and was carrying the fight to the Assyrian homeland. He was aided in this by the Medes, a collection of tribes living in the Zagros Mountains on the eastern border of Mesopotamia. The Assyrians had long spoken glowingly of the warlike qualities of the Medes.

The beginning of the end for Assyria came with the capture and destruction of the city of Ashur in 614. Then in 612 the unthinkable happened. The greatest Assyrian city of all, Nineveh, fell after a siege of only three months. A claimant to the Assyrian throne fled westward with the remnants of the once-mighty Assyrian army. Landing first in Haran, they were ejected from there and fled farther west to Carchemish on the upper Euphrates in what is today Syria. There they were joined by the new Egyptian pharaoh Neco, who was probably trying to keep a weak Assyria alive as a buffer between him and the Babylonians. But in 605 the Babylonian army, now led by Nabopolassar's son Nebuchadnezzar, struck the final blow, destroying both the Assyrian and Egyptian armies.

Following up on his advantage, Nebuchadnezzar immediately marched south, reclaiming the coastal region for Mesopotamian control. Local rulers who for a short time had acknowledged Egyptian rule quickly changed sides. Among them was the Judean king Jehoiakim. He had been placed on the throne by Neco when Neco had deposed Jehoiakim's brother Jehoahaz in 609 (2 Kings 23:33–35). But whatever loyalty Jehoiakim may have felt to his former overlord evaporated when Nebuchadnezzar arrived. Jehoiakim surrendered, agreeing to pay an annual tribute, and gave up to Nebuchadnezzar not only some of the temple treasures but also hostages, among whom were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (Dan. 1:1–6).

But Jehoiakim's loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar was as fleeting as had been his loyalty to Neco. After just three years he broke the solemn covenant he had made, apparently hoping that Nebuchadnezzar's other obligations might be more important than the goings-on in faraway Judah.¹⁰ That was not to be the case with an energetic ruler like Nebuchadnezzar. First, he sent various local groups to harass Jehoiakim (2 Kings 24:2; Jer. 35:11), and

then he sent the Babylonian army itself. They arrived in 598. It was that year that Jehoiakim died (2 Kings 24:6). It is hard to believe that his dying at just this point was coincidental. This is especially so since his son Jehoiachin was only eighteen and surrendered the city after only three months. But the Bible does not satisfy our curiosity on the question. At any rate, this time Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin and most of the royal family into captivity along with other leaders and craftsmen (including the young priest Ezekiel). The Babylonian monarch replaced Jehoiachin with his uncle Mattaniah, renamed Zedekiah.

If the picture of Jehoiakim given in the book of Jeremiah is of a hard-eyed opportunist, the picture of Zedekiah is of a waffler who tried to please all sides simultaneously while having no firm convictions of his own. The biblical writers did not even consider him to be the legitimate king. As serious as Judah's spiritual condition was, it is clear from the example of Assyria's repentance in response to Jonah's preaching that if there had come a true national repentance even as late as Zedekiah's time, the city might have been spared and history been quite different. But although Zedekiah was Josiah's son, he was no Josiah. If he even understood the issues that all the great prophets had raised and that Jeremiah was declaring at that very moment, he certainly had no desire to address them. His popularity might have suffered.

Thus, Zedekiah asked Jeremiah for advice privately but was unwilling to support him publicly. The people drifted deeper and deeper into the kind of attitudes and behaviors that would seal their destruction. The picture God had given Isaiah 125 years earlier of a people with blind eyes, deaf ears, and fat, unresponsive hearts had come true with a vengeance. Part of their blindness was that they could not believe the city would fall. After all, they had God's temple, where the holy sacrifices were offered. Beyond this, if God was the God he claimed to be, how could he renege on the promises he had made to their ancestors? So, persisting in injustice, corruption, and violence, the Judean people believed their false prophets, who told them God was pleased with them and would shortly deliver them from the Babylonian threat.

It was in this atmosphere that Zedekiah, listening to counselors who assured him that Egypt would help and fearing a revolt among the people if he continued to tax them to pay the Babylonian tribute, decided to rebel, as

his brother Jehoiakim had done before him. One wonders whether he really understood the gravity of what he was doing. Like the Assyrians before them, the Babylonians tended to give people three chances. If there were two rebellions after the initial submission (and there always were), total destruction was the result. This was Jerusalem's second rebellion. The results were entirely predictable. The only question was how soon the Babylonian army would arrive and how long the city could hold out.

The Babylonians began their siege of Jerusalem in 588, and the city was able to hold out for two years. But finally, as it must have done without a divine miracle, the city fell in July of 586. As unthinkable to the Assyrians as the fall of Nineveh had been twenty-five years earlier, the fall of Jerusalem was even more unthinkable to the Judeans. Had God failed? Had they believed lies about his greatness? Were his promises in vain? Had their sin been too much even for God?

All these questions and more must have filled the Judeans' minds as they trudged off into captivity. Many were in bitter despair, believing that everything they had once believed had been proven false. But here and there throughout the group were those who refused to give up hope. We know they did not because somehow they managed to smuggle out copies of the sacred scrolls. Among these was the book of Isaiah, along with the Torah and the writings of the other prophets. How exciting it must have been for those exiles to open Isaiah and to read what is now Isaiah 40–55 with new eyes, opened by the radically new situation. There they saw that Isaiah, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, had anticipated all their questions and had provided them with answers they had never understood before. They did not need to give up hope; God had not been defeated; he had not cast them off; the Babylonian gods were not superior to him.

Undoubtedly the somewhat different approach of the Babylonians to exile from that of the Assyrians helped to promote this renaissance of hope. Whereas the Assyrians had tried to break up national groups by scattering them in various places across the empire (see 2 Kings 17:6), the Babylonians permitted such groups to settle in one place. So the Judeans were placed together in central Babylon near the Kebar River at a place called Tel Abib (see Ezek. 1:1; 3:15). Thus the faithful were able to encourage those whose faith was wavering by getting them into the study of the Scriptures, especially of the prophets. When they discovered that the

prophets had foreseen their present situation in varying levels of detail, they were surely moved to see what else the prophets had seen. There they found that the prophets had not only predicted the Exile but also predicted something that had never occurred before—a national return from exile.

Of course, many could not believe such an impossible thing, but their doubt was surely shaken when they heard their contemporary Ezekiel saying the same thing. What was difficult for them to grasp was the truth that God can do new things. They thought that he could not let Jerusalem fall, and when he did, they were sure that it was because he had been defeated and that therefore the ancient promises were nullified. The thought that God might have engineered the destruction of Jerusalem *in order to keep the ancient promises with a purified remnant* (Isa. 4:2–6) was "thinking outside the box," and it is clear both from Ezekiel and Isaiah that most of the exiles were no more able to do that than most of those before the Exile.

By its very nature paganism fosters such "boxed" thinking. The gods are personified natural, social, and psychological forces. They are the result of human thought that seeks to take an often-chaotic world and reduce it to a mental order. Pagan thinkers specifically do not look for the new and unique. Such things are freaks that do not produce order. Rather, they look for the recurring cycles and patterns that are always so. The pagans do not want to go some way they have never been before. That way lies chaos.

This is the basis for the biting satires on the gods that appear in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. These gods and this way of thinking are a human attempt to get control of life. What good could those things do anybody? Can the creation save the creation from the creation? Not likely! The saving God is the good Creator, who made creation in certain ways but is never bound by those ways. The only thing he is bound by is his own consistent nature. Consistent, yes. Predictable, never. To us fearful humans, frantic to control our little worlds, such a picture is frightening. It means letting go of the familiar and casting ourselves into arms we cannot see, yet believing on the basis of the Word of God and the testimony of those who have gone before that the arms are there, stronger and more loving than anything we could ever imagine on our own.

Some of the exiled Judeans believed what they read in the Scriptures and resisted the temptation to settle down in a new environment and adopt its

ways. They refused to give up the ancient promises. They kept their bags packed, spiritually speaking. No better example can be found of these attitudes and behaviors than Daniel and his friends. They refused to be assimilated into the Babylonian culture and religion, looking to the Scriptures for their self-understanding. This is seen clearly when we find Daniel praying for the return from exile on the basis of what he read in the book of Jeremiah (Dan. 9:1–19). As a result, when the man from the east, Cyrus, whom Isaiah had foretold (Isa. 41:2; 44:28–45:6), appeared, these believing Judeans were not surprised. Like Daniel, they had read the Scriptures carefully and knew that the Exile would not last longer than seventy years. So when Cyrus's decree permitting them to go home was made, they were ready.

The so-called Neo-Babylonian Empire looms large for students of the Bible because it was so pivotal in the history of Jerusalem and the Judean people. But actually, it was a brief interlude between the Assyrian and Persian Empires. It was to a great extent a "one-man show." That man was Nebuchadnezzar. When he passed from the scene in 562 B.C., after a forty-three-year reign, the winds that would destroy his work were already blowing. From one point of view the Neo-Babylonian Empire only existed while the Medes caught their breath and recruited a new partner, the Persians. The Medes and an associated group, the Umman-Manda, kept control of the northern part of the old Assyrian Empire. After failing to defeat the Persians who were under the leadership of a half-Median named Cyrus, they joined forces with him. He was able to provide a cohesive leadership that had been lacking, and by 547 he had consolidated his control to the point where he began to move from his northern bases south toward the Babylonian homeland.

In the first seven years after Nebuchadnezzar's death no fewer than three of his descendants took the throne and were removed from it for one reason or another. The man who emerged from all of this was a Babylonian official named Nabonidus, who ruled from 555 until the fall of Babylon in 539. The data about him are somewhat fragmentary; thus, historians vary widely in their estimate of him. Some see him as a scholar and antiquarian who let the crises of the empire go unaddressed. Others see him as a daring and innovative thinker who was overwhelmed by unmanageable realities." In any case, we know that he left Babylon to live in the oasis of Tema for ten

years, taking some of the chief deities of Babylon with him. He left a vice-regent named Belshazzar in charge in Babylon.¹²

Whether from Nabonidus's neglect or in spite of his best efforts, Cyrus went from strength to strength. When he finally appeared before Babylon in 539, the city fell to him with hardly a murmur. One of the first things he did was to proclaim that any exiled people who so wished could return home and that the royal treasury would pay for the rebuilding of any damaged temples.¹³ The Judeans were ready, and some 50,000 made the long journey, reaching Jerusalem probably in 537 (see Ezra 2:64).

540-500 B.C.

IF THE PROMISES of the prophets had enabled the Judean people to survive the Exile, it is possible that those same prophets made it more difficult to survive the Return. Many of the prophets, in a manner continued by Jesus himself, had a way of telescoping future events together. Thus, the predictions of the messianic age and the setting up of the kingdom of God seemed to follow closely on the predictions of the Return. Since God had proven faithful in the Exile and then in the Return, surely now the returned exiles could look for all the nations of the world to come flowing to Jerusalem, bringing their wealth with them. Surely a descendant of Jehoiachin would soon ascend the throne of Israel in Judah, there to rule the world in righteousness and peace. Surely Jerusalem was about to become the center of a world empire.

None of these things occurred, however. Judah's condition was not better than before the Exile; in fact, it was worse. At least before the Exile they had had a semblance of independence with their own king, government, and army. And even stripped of much of its golden finery, the temple of Solomon was an impressive structure, fit to be the palace of the God of the world. But now what? They had no king; they had absolutely no independence; they were a subdivision of a division of a Persian region, with their "county seat" being, of all places, in Samaria! Jerusalem was in ruins, and there was neither the wealth nor the incentive to rebuild it. As for the temple of the Lord, when the foundations were laid, it was hard to distinguish the shouts of joy from the cries of those who remembered the glory of the former building (Ezra 3:12). The prospects were so disappointing that the foundations of the new temple lay exposed for

sixteen years until the prophets Haggai and Zechariah finally convinced the people to get the task underway again in 520. The rebuilding project was finally completed in 516, twenty years after it began and seventy years after the previous temple had been burned.

In the world around, Persia reigned supreme without a rival. The Babylonians had welcomed Cyrus as a deliverer, much as the people of Ukraine and Belo-Russia welcomed Hitler. But Cyrus proved much more worthy of the acclaim. His proclamation of a return for the exiles was not a fluke. Rather, it was expressive of a new imperial policy, one in which legality, fairness, and generosity would replace terror. The result was a remarkably peaceful two hundred years for the ancient Near East. While it is true that failure to pay the heavy Persian taxes brought retribution again and again, there was little organized rebellion.

When both Assyria and Babylon fell, it was largely due to dissension and revolt from within the empire. That was not to be the case for Persia. Here the quest for legality and fairness had ballooned into a wasteful and elephantine bureaucracy, and the incredible wealth that the empire produced had sapped the original energy and drive that had conquered a world. The result was that when an army of lean and hungry Greeks met a Persian army almost three times larger in battle at Issus in what is now central Turkey in 333, the Persians suffered a defeat from which they never really recovered. After securing the eastern coast of the Mediterranean all the way to Egypt, where he was crowned Pharaoh, Alexander the Great defeated Darius III once again and in 331 captured Babylon, Susa, and Persepolis, burning the latter to the ground.

If the Judeans struggled as to how to define themselves as a people under Persian hegemony, they also struggled with how to define their faith. For all of their history they had thought of Yahweh as standing over against the other gods in competition. It was an either-or struggle. As Elijah said it, "Either Baal or Yahweh is God, and today we will see which one it is" (see 1 Kings 18:22–24). The same continued to be true in Babylon: Is Yahweh God, or is it Bel and Nebo (Isa. 46:1–5)?

But the Persians brought in a different religious policy, just as they did a different foreign policy. Now syncretism ruled the day. It was no longer "my god versus your god." Now it was "the divine has many faces." To you it looks like this; to me it looks like that; but we are both looking at the

same divine reality. In many ways this created a more serious threat for the biblical faith than the old either-or confrontation. Now it seemed possible to worship Yahweh and Baal-Shamayim ("the Lord of the Heavens," a Near Eastern title for the Greek god Zeus) at the same time. Now one need no longer endure the stigma of separation and isolation, and equally important, one need no longer worry about whether one was worshiping in the right way or not.

If the Persian premise that all gods and goddesses are manifestations of the one divine essence had been correct, then all of this would have been fine. But of course, that premise is not correct. All the gods and goddesses of the pagan world may indeed have been the manifestation of the same basic understanding of deity, but that understanding is not the same as the one found in the Bible. As noted above, all pagan gods and goddesses are simply personifications of the forces of creation. All of them are built on the premise that there is a basic continuity between all things. Thus, deity can be explained by projecting back from creation. Just as creation is many, so are the gods; just as creation is determined, so are the gods; just as creation is the result of sexual behavior, so are the gods; just as creation manifests an endless struggle between order and chaos, so do the gods.

But the biblical premise is diametrically opposite. It posits transcendence, with the Creator being radically discontinuous with his creation. Thus, he may not be represented by any created form. He is not many, he is One; he does not function in cycles but acts purposefully; his actions are not determined but are radically free; he is not sexed and does not act in a sexual manner; he is not ethically neutral, containing both order and disorder in himself, but is profoundly ethical. To say that, when the pagan looks at Baal and the Judean looks at Yahweh, they are simply looking at two sides of the same coin is to fail to see the radical nature of biblical religion.

Given both the political and the spiritual factors, it is not surprising that after the burst of energy needed to finish the temple, the former lethargy and apathy seemed to set in again. Clearly, the people were struggling with what is now called a "paradigm shift." How could they continue to maintain the radical uniqueness of God when they had no king and no kingdom and

when the whole spirit of the age said that the maintaining of such an idea was not merely pass but unnecessary, a waste of energy?

Along with these problems, Isaiah 56–66 also makes it clear that there were other issues. Was ethical righteousness really so necessary? They had not been delivered from Babylon because of their righteousness but because of God's righteousness, his gracious keeping of his covenant with his people. So why try, especially since we seem regularly to fail in the attempt? It is our birthright as the people of the covenant that guarantees our relationship with God. Thus, at the same time as it was becoming easier and easier to blur the distinction between pagan worship and true worship, it was also easier to say that it was merely your genealogy that made you a member of God's family.

Unquestionably, the strong arguments for the uniqueness of the Lord that appear in Isaiah 40–55 were important to the thinking of the Judeans at this point. Again, Isaiah seems to have understood what challenges the future would hold for the things he had said about God's lordship over the nations in chapters 6–39 and was inspired to address them. Furthermore, chapters 56–66 address the questions of worship, ethics, and internationalism in ways that are consistent with chapters 6–39 but that carry the discussion further in light of the new situation.

The prophet reaffirms the promises of a new messianic kingdom, demonstrating that the earlier promises still hold true. But he also makes it plain that separation is not in order to keep the pagans out. Rather, it is in order to have a distinctive and coherent message to call the pagan *into* from their own darkness. God does not hate the non-Judeans; what he hates is their false religion, which is destroying them. Furthermore, Isaiah makes it plain that there is nothing sacred in the Judean bloodline. A Judean who succumbs to pagan religion and abandons the ethics of the covenant is as detestable to the Lord as any non-Judean would be.

At the same time, while the relevance of the message of Isaiah 56–66 to the Return is clear, some of the characteristic features of the postexilic prophets are missing. Chief among these are the importance of the temple and correct worship, such as appear in Ezekiel, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, as well as in Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. One way of explaining this difference is that espoused by Paul Hanson, in which he argues that those writings are all by the followers of Ezekiel, whereas the

followers of "Deutero-Isaiah" were visionaries who had no real interest in institutions but were proto-apocalyptists, who looked forward to God's universal kingdom at the end of time. However, since there is no indication elsewhere in the Bible of such competing groups, it seems that another explanation ought to be given consideration—namely, that these chapters were not written in 540–500 and that that issue, which was of great significance to persons of that time, was not in the writer's mind when he wrote.

Authorship and Date

As MENTIONED ABOVE, the book of Isaiah cites no other author than "Isaiah son of Amoz" of Jerusalem, stating that he received his vision during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, that is, during the last half of the eighth century B.C. This attribution of authorship appears twice in the book (1:1; 2:1). Many believe that the first is intended to apply to the book as a whole and the second specifically to chapters 2–5. This was the view of the church up until the eighteenth century A.D., when the scholars of the Enlightenment began to insist that all truth claims had to bow at the bar of human reason. Scholars had, of course, long noted the absence of historical references after chapter 39. They had also noted certain stylistic and vocabulary differences between chapters 1-39 and 40-66. They had also commented on the announcement of the name of the Persian emperor Cyrus more than a hundred years before his birth and the fact that chapters 40-66 seemed to be addressed to people of the exilic period. But it remained to the German scholar J. C. Döderlein, writing in 1775, to first propose in print that the present book might consist of a conflation of two different works.¹⁷

J. G. Eichhorn amplified this idea and gave it further development, asserting that all of chapters 40–66 were written by someone other than Isaiah. This view was increasingly popular in Europe, gaining the support of such eminent scholars as Gesenius. However, the traditional view did not lack for support either. Such notable persons as R. Stier, Electrope F. Delitzsch, and the American J. A. Alexander argued forcefully for the single authorship of the book. The influence of these and others meant that there was a certain moderation of tone in the debate in the third quarter of the nineteenth century.

However, this was all to change with the appearance of the commentary of Bernard Duhm in 1892.²³ Much as J. Wellhausen had been able to do with the criticism of the Pentateuch, Duhm was able to take a plethora of theories about the authorship of the book and integrate them into one appealing approach. He proposed that there were not two authors but three, Proto-Isaiah being responsible for large parts of chapters 1–39, Deutero-Isaiah for chapters 40–55, and Trito-Isaiah for chapters 56–66. This proposal, along with others he made in the commentary, seemed to solve the various problems encountered in previous suggestions. As a result, the idea of multiple authorship of the book gained widespread scholarly acceptance.

However, if anyone thought that Duhm's work settled the question of the book of Isaiah's authorship, he was mistaken. A contemporary of Duhm by the name of Hermann Gunkel was proposing a new theory of the composition of ancient literature, based on the research into the origins of German folk literature by a number of researchers, including the Grimm brothers. This theory argued that folk literature was not produced by single authors but was the product of communities, that written literature had a long oral prehistory, and that the particular function of the literary unit in its community required a particular literary form. Although Gunkel was an Old Testament scholar, his application of form-critical methods to the Old Testament did not gain much initial favor. It was only after the method had begun to be used fairly widely in New Testament studies that it began to be applied in the 1920s and 1930s to the Old Testament.

One of the effects of form criticism was to divide books into smaller and smaller units with increasing skepticism about the actual authorship of any of them. This was certainly the result in Isaianic studies. While chapters 40–55 tended to be retained for the supposedly brilliant and spiritual "Deutero-Isaiah," the individual "Trito-Isaiah" disappeared completely with the material in chapters 56–66 considered to be the work of a community in the postexilic period. As for "Proto-Isaiah," or "First Isaiah," his work is largely restricted to portions of chapters 6–12 and 28–31. The rest of chapters 1–39 is a miscellaneous collection coming from various points in the formation of "the Isaiah corpus," a process that was supposed to have gone on more or less continuously from 740 until the Hasmonean period (165 B.C.).

To explain how this process was carried out, an "Isaianic school" was hypothesized. In this hypothesis the disciples of "First Isaiah" began the process of adding to and amplifying the master's works. This process went on from generation to generation for more than five hundred years. The reason these persons are not named is twofold. (1) They did not consider they were really saying anything different from what the master had said. (2) Apart from "Deutero-Isaiah," the work really was that of a community and not of individuals.²⁴

A number of arguments can be lodged against this hypothesis. Above all, it must be said that there is no objective evidence to support it. The earliest text we have is the Isaiah Scroll from the collection at Qumran. This scroll is generally dated to the early first century B.C., and apart from certain minor spelling differences and some text-critical issues, the text is identical to that found in the Hebrew manuscripts of a millennium later. Clearly the text had been in existence long enough to become completely standardized with no hint of any complex redactional process leading to this form. Interestingly, the present chapter 39 ends only two lines from the bottom of a column. If the scribes had any sense of the separation between "First Isaiah" and "Second Isaiah," it would have been easy to leave the last two lines blank and to have started what is now chapter 40 at the top of the next column. But they did not do this. They used the final two lines of the column to begin that chapter.

Another argument against this theory is its dependence on the "Isaianic school," something for which there is no precedent and no evidence. To be sure, Isaiah speaks of sealing his writings and giving them to his disciples for future generations (8:16). But this is far from demonstrating that what he gave them was the equivalent of a dozen chapters that they and fifteen generations of their descendants developed into the present sixty-six chapters. An analogous process would be if Jesus had actually left only enough words and actions to fill out three or four pages in a book and that his disciples then replicated themselves for five hundred years while adding to and amplifying his supposed words and actions until the Gospel of Mark was actually completed in its present form in A.D. 500. The idea is not credible.

Yet another argument that must be lodged against the hypothesis of multiple authorship of Isaiah is the fact that it has not been able to produce any unanimity of results. While the work of Holladay noted above is one example of how the process is supposed to have worked, there would be almost no scholar who would agree with many of the details of his contentions. Although biblical studies are far from being an exact science, it is still true that if a methodology is correct, it ought to yield substantially similar results in the hands of different researchers. In fact, that is not the case with the study of Isaiah. Two commentators who both share a commitment to form criticism and to multiple authorship of Isaiah may vary by as much as three hundred years as to when a particular unit was written.²⁵ They would disagree just as widely on the literary relation of that unit to those around it. There is something wrong with a methodology that cannot yield more predictable results.

Finally, it must be asked why the supposed authors have intentionally led their readers to believe that the whole is the work of Isaiah ben Amoz of the eighth century B.C., for this is clearly what has been done. The superscription at the beginning of the book can point in no other direction. They want us to believe that this person in the 700s B.C. foresaw what was going to happen to his people over the next several hundred years and conceived a great theological structure to address not only those times but ones further in the future. This conclusion is furthered when we discover that the chief argument for the uniqueness of God over the gods in chapters 41–48 is his ability to specifically foretell the future, something the idols could not and did not do. But if the writers knew at the same time they were making this argument that Isaiah ben Amoz had never foretold what they were saying he had, what does this do to their theological credibility? In fact, they were fabricating false evidence, since Yahweh could no more tell the future than the idols could. The towering theology of the prince of the prophets is in fact built on a foundation of falsehoods, if we accept this hypothesis.²⁶

But how are we to explain the data that resulted in the theory of multiple authorship if we do not accept that theory? Some of those data are: addressing future audiences in ways that betray a more than general understanding of what the issues will be in those future times; stylistic and vocabulary differences between various sections; differing theological foci; the lack of any obvious outline; and so on.

Let us begin with the latter. Ancient literature was not characterized by the kinds of unities that the Greek rhetoricians declared were necessary. Rather, they tended to be a grouping together of relatively independent episodes. Classical examples of this form of composition can be found in the Sumerian/Akkadian Gilgamesh Epic and in the Greek *Odyssey*. This feature is said to be characteristic of literature that has an oral prehistory.

Whether this is true or not, the same features can be found in the Bible. While the books of Genesis–2 Kings all show a general chronological organization, and while it may be argued that Genesis-Deuteronomy emphasize one theme and Deuteronomy–2 Kings another closely related theme, it is hard to find a logical outline in any of these books.²⁷ The feature is even more pronounced in those books known in the English tradition as the Major and Minor Prophets. In several of the books it is possible to identify units of thought, and in many cases readers from diverse perspectives would agree with the identification. So, for instance, Amos 1–2 constitute judgments on the nations, while Isaiah 3–6 are messages against Israel, and chapters 7–9 are visions of Israel's destruction and restoration. However, it is virtually impossible to discover a logical progression in the thought of the book.

This is true on a grand scale in Jeremiah, where there is even disagreement as to the length of the units of thought. Apart from the call in chapter 1, the hopeful words in chapters 30–32, and the oracles against the nations in chapters 46–51, the commentators cannot agree on what the other units in the book are. Thus, the situation in the book of Isaiah is not something unique. Like all the other prophetic books (with the possible exception of Ezekiel), the material in the book was first given orally and then collected either by the prophet himself or by disciples. As such, the material constitutes a kind of anthology of the prophet's work. Sometimes reports of the prophet's life are interwoven with the things he said. It is probable that differing versions of these circulated even during the prophet's own lifetime.

Again, the Gospels seem to demonstrate the probability of this, as do the differing versions of Jeremiah in the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint. In the case of Jesus, his importance to the Christian community dictated that four authoritative versions of his life and work should be preserved. But in the case of other books, it is apparent that the Judean community fairly

quickly recognized one of the versions as having authority, with the rest being discarded. The destruction of Jerusalem in the midst of Jeremiah's ministry and the fragmentation of the community short-circuited this process for that book and left us with two versions extant. In view of these common characteristics of Hebrew prophetic writing, the somewhat miscellaneous character of the book of Isaiah cannot be said to point necessarily to multiple authorship.

The remaining three issues identified above—addressing different audiences, differing vocabulary and style, and differing theological foci—are all part of one set of issues and must be dealt with together. As discussed above under the historical background, different parts of the book do seem to be addressed to different audiences. This in itself goes far to explain why there are different theological emphases in these different parts. Different situations require different emphases, and different emphases may well require a different language. Thus, the question must be: Is it possible that one human mind (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) could have and would have been able to speak to (not about) persons in the distant future?

As mentioned above, it seems to me that the different audiences and theology were necessitated by the sweep of the vision given to Isaiah. He had seen a picture of a nation of rebellious, arrogant, and corrupt people being carried away on a Mesopotamian flood called forth by Israel's God (6:1–8:22; 9:8–10:4). Yet he also saw a descendant of Jesse leading a restored remnant of God's people in a kingdom of righteousness and hope (9:1–7; 10:5–11:16). He saw a people who had refused to trust God and were swept away (8:6–8) redeemed and living in hopeful trust (12:1–6). The breadth of this vision could not be confined to his own day, a day in which God had told him that he would be ignored and rejected. If the vision was to have final relevance, it had to find that relevance in people yet unborn.

If these unborn people were to trust the God whom their parents had ultimately refused to trust, then it was imperative that those future generations should know that God can still be trusted even if we have refused him, experienced the results of that refusal, and are in complete despair. Furthermore, when we have dared to believe again and are indeed delivered, it is then that we need to know that trust is useless unless it issues

in a life of righteousness. If Isaiah's book had stopped at what is now chapter 39, its effect would have been abortive, both in encouraging faith during the Exile and in providing a vehicle for seeing how the changed situation after the Exile could be reconciled with the preexilic faith.

But what about the significantly different language after chapter 40? It is different, there is no question of that. The Hebrew is both simpler and more lyrical. Some words that were common before chapter 40 may appear rarely or not at all after chapter 40. The differences are significant enough that Yehuda Radday concluded on the basis of a computer-based study that the same person could not have written chapters 7–39 and 40–55.28 If we argue that Radday's conclusions were based upon certain unproven assumptions about the possible limits of variation in one person's writing, what might account for such a significant difference?

It must be granted that what follows is hypothetical, but it is no more so than the myriad multiple-authorship hypotheses. Sometime after 701, perhaps ten years or more, when Manasseh has joined his father on the throne and it is clear Hezekiah's reforms are not going to last, the elderly prophet is given a vision of the future and of the ways in which what he has taught and believed all his life will relate to that future. The vision is theologically detailed but historically general. It is a vision of the triumph of the transcendent Creator-Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel whom Isaiah has proclaimed, both in history and in the human heart. It is loosely placed within a couple of future historic settings, but it is freed from any specific bonds of a particularized historical setting. I believe this understanding of the origins of the material within Isaiah's life might account for the variations.

If it is possible to answer the questions that have led to the multiple authorship theories, we must also ask whether there is positive evidence supporting single authorship of the book. There is such evidence. One of the more interesting pieces of evidence is the even distribution of the phrase "the Holy One of Israel" throughout the book. This phrase only occurs thirty-one times in the Old Testament, and no fewer than twenty-five of these are in Isaiah, with twelve occurrences appearing in chapters 1–39 and thirteen appearing in chapters 40–55.²⁹ And when the one occurrence in the Bible of the synonymous "the Holy One of Jacob" at Isaiah 29:23 is factored in, the distribution is exactly even. If we accept multiple

authorship, we would have to posit an attempt by the later editors to be sure that the master's favorite term was adequately covered in the later material assigned to him.³⁰

And while it is true that there are numerous instances where a word will appear only in chapters 1–39 and not in chapters 40–66, there are also a number of terms that show up in both (or all three) parts of the book *and not elsewhere in the Old Testament*. Again, one would have to assume that someone did a concordance study of the master and inserted his unique words here and there in the later material. This is especially the case where a rare word shows up only once or twice in chapters 1–39 and once or twice in chapters 40–66. That this should happen by chance in a multiple-authorship scheme is unlikely.³¹ We would have to suppose that someone discovered the word in one place and then intentionally used it in the later additions simply in order to create the illusion of single authorship.

Another evidence of the single authorship of the book is the absence of specific historical references for the exilic and postexilic periods. When the book of Isaiah is compared to Ezekiel or to Malachi, these differences become obvious. Whereas it is typical among the Hebrew prophets to root their oracles in specific events and circumstances, and whereas this feature is present in chapters 6–39 of Isaiah, there is almost none of this kind of material in chapters 40–66.

Three possible explanations present themselves: (1) The author did not know this information; (2) the author knew it but did not include it; (3) the author originally included it, but it was removed for some reason. If the author of the material was Isaiah, then the facts are easily explicable. Isaiah knew the general circumstances of the exilic and postexilic periods, but apart from the one startling fact of the name of the deliverer Cyrus, he knew no other details. On the one hand, if the author was writing at the time of the events and knew the details, as in the case of Cyrus, there is no obvious reason to make the rest of his presentation so ahistorical. On the other hand, if the details were originally there but were suppressed in all cases but the reference to Cyrus, then we again are faced with editors who want us to believe Isaiah of Jerusalem is responsible for the whole book while they know that is untrue.³²

Not only are the expected historical details absent, but there are also in chapters 40–66 some hints of an eighth-century setting for the writing of

these chapters.³³ Instead of the expected emphasis on the restoration of proper worship in the face of the syncretistic tendencies of the day, there is the kind of diatribe against ritualism that is characteristic of the preexilic prophets. The attacks on the idols are likewise more like that of Jeremiah and his predecessors than they are of Ezekiel and his successors.³⁴ The concern for the priesthood and its purity, which is characteristic of the postexilic writings, is not found in Isaiah 40–66. While it is possible to hypothesize an anticultic group that existed after the Exile in order to explain these features, that is only necessary if one has already concluded these chapters to have been written in the postexilic period. Apart from that a priori reason, there is no evidence of such a group in any of the biblical books known to be postexilic. A much simpler explanation is that these chapters were written well before the Exile and that while they deal with the theological issues raised by the exilic and postexilic experiences, they do so from within the eighth-century context.

In concluding this section, we must say that there is no a priori reason why God could not have used multiple authors to create a unified work of theology like the book of Isaiah. He is God, and he can do what he likes. But the question is, What does the book itself claim? Here there seems to me to be no question. The book claims to have come through one human mind, that of Isaiah ben Amoz, who lived in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. and was gifted by God to see the future in such a way that it would forever demonstrate that Yahweh of Israel was not one of the gods. Yahweh's ability to tell the future in detail was the ultimate evidence that he was not a personification of the forces of creation but was the Creator of creation, the One who made it, continued to direct it, and would eventually redeem it.

All of the multiple authorship hypotheses finally undercut this theological point because their underlying rationale is that God *could not* have so inspired Isaiah ben Amoz. It seems to me we cannot have it both ways. If we conclude the theological claims of the book are true, then we cannot avoid the implications of that conclusion for the book's authorship. If we conclude the book was created by a group of persons much later than Isaiah, then we are forced to admit that these persons knew what they were saying was not true but believed it ought to be true and thus tried to create such an account of the book's origins as would make readers believe it was. Such a book may still be an inspiring piece of theological innovation that is

of interest to historical theologians, but it has no claims upon those of us who read it 2,700 years later.³⁵

Central Themes of the Book of Isaiah

WE NOTED ABOVE that the book of Isaiah is rather like a modern symphony, with themes appearing and reappearing in fascinating harmony. Not only is this true of the themes, it is also true of a number of figures of speech, some of which ought to be mentioned here before we deal with the themes themselves in more detail. Some of those figures of speech are: trees, highways, banners, deserts, gardens and fertile fields, dehildren, and light and darkness. As can be seen from the references given, these figures crop up throughout the book, giving the careful reader a sense of discovery and delight as he or she recognizes the author's craft in recalling an earlier figure and using it in a related, but amplified, way. On the thematic level, as with the figures, a recurring feature is the pairing of opposites, such as judgment and hope, servanthood and kingdom, trust and rebellion, and arrogance and humiliation. Other important themes are the uniqueness of Yahweh, righteousness, and the nations.

Judgment and Hope

FROM THE OUTSET of the book these two themes are interchanged. The interchange appears first in chapter 1, where the accusations of 1:1–15 give way to a promise of restoration if there is genuine repentance (1:16–20). The interchange occurs again in 1:21–27, with 1:21–24 detailing the perversion of the leaders and the destruction that must follow, but with 1:25–27 telling us that the destruction is for the purpose of purification. Finally, chapter 1 ends on the note of accusation with which it began (1:28–31). On a larger scale, the interchange continues through the introduction (chs. 1–5), with chapter 1 being primarily an announcement of judgment; 2:1–5 a promise of hope; 2:6–4:1 reverting to announcement of judgment; 4:2–6 a promise of hope; and 5:1–30 an announcement of imminent judgment. The pattern is then repeated in the book as a whole, with chapters 7–39 giving primary emphasis to judgment and a minor emphasis on hope, while the major emphasis of chapters 40–66 is hope with a secondary emphasis on judgment.

What is the point of this interchange, especially as it is laid out for us in the introductory chapters? Isaiah's point seems to be that if there is to be hope for the nation, it is only through judgment. To be sure, as chapter 1 indicates, if there were a genuine turning to God as evidenced in a changed way of treating one another, judgment could be avoided. However, as Isaiah's call experience made plain to him, there was no likelihood of genuine repentance for this people. Therefore, if there was to be any hope for them to become a clean and bright lamp (4:2–6) through whom the nations could be blessed (as per the promise to Abraham, and in 2:1–5), it was only *through* judgment.

Obviously this was difficult for the Judean people to grasp. They had the ingrained idea that it was *either* judgment *or* hope. After all, God had made all these promises to them. They were his chosen people and no one else. They were the custodians of his holy city and his holy temple. If judgment came in the form that some of the prophets were talking about—destruction of the city and the temple, and even of some part of the people—then all the promises of God were null and void. Thus the only hope was to avoid judgment. To all of this Isaiah said a resounding no. The promises of God would only be realized through fire. Just as the unclean lips of the man Isaiah could only be used to proclaim the holiness of God to his people after they had been purged with fire (Isa. 6), so the unclean lips of the nation were going to have to be purged with the cleansing fires of judgment if the nation could ever proclaim those promises of God to the nations of the world.

If the people of Isaiah's day had difficulty believing there was hope beyond judgment, it is clear from the book that the people of the exilic period would have difficulty believing in hope after judgment. For them the impossible had occurred. As far as they could see, all was lost. God had either abandoned them or they had been defeated by the Babylonian gods. The holy city and temple were forever gone. The priesthood was defiled and could never be cleansed. As much as the pagans had difficulty imagining anything other than what had always been, so did the Judeans. They could not imagine that God was so creative that he could do something completely new to keep the ancient promises.

Thus, the prophet has to keep calling on them to believe what God says he will do for them, to listen to the promises he makes of redemption and restoration. Like their ancestors, they really could not believe that judgment is never God's intended last word but that his intention is to use judgment to bring about lasting hope.

The message of judgment and hope goes through a third permutation when it is addressed to the postexilic audience. Here the danger is that the restored Judeans will believe that hope realized removes the possibility of judgment. Since they have been restored through no effort or merit of their own, there is a serious possibility they will therefore believe that they can continue to experience the blessing of God while living lives of ritual purity and social wickedness. Here the prophet has to tell them that this is not the case. Yes, God has restored them, and yes, they are in line to experience the fulfillment of the kingdom of God. But that does not remove the possibility of further judgment. In fact, an obedient foreigner or eunuch is more a child of the kingdom than a pure-bred Judean who is living in sin. Yes, it is true that judgment is not God's intended last word. But unless people repent and live godly lives by the Spirit's power, it will be his last word.

Servanthood and Kingdom

As MENTIONED ABOVE, the introductory chapters present the reader with a dilemma. How can the proud, rebellious, polluted, and ultimately desolate Israel that is described in Isaiah 1; 2:6–4:1; and 5 ever become the pure, submissive, and abundant repository of the word of God for the nations described in 2:1–5 and 4:2–6? Isaiah seems to offer his own experience as a solution to this dilemma. Just as his unclean lips were cleansed so that he could declare the word of God to the nation, so the nation's unclean lips could be cleansed so that it could declare God's word to the nations. Israel could become the servant of God to fulfill that role.

This is made explicit in chapters 40–66, but it is implicit in chapters 1–39 as well. In chapter 6 the beginning of Isaiah's commissioning into God's service is a vision of God and of himself that makes his condition clear. Without that accurate picture there is no hope of ultimate cleansing. The same thing happens to Israel in chapters 7–39. Here the nation is given a vision of the glory and greatness of God that demonstrates the trustworthiness of God. This is the essential basis for servanthood. Unless we can trust the Master in every respect, there is no hope of our laying aside our pride and putting on the towel of servanthood.

The first lesson in the relationship between servanthood and kingdom is given in the picture of the servant-king in chapters 7–12. These chapters deal with the Assyrian crisis of 735 B.C. Here Judah is threatened not only by her neighbors, Israel and Syria, but ultimately by the Assyrian colossus. Visions of oppression, domination, and terror rear up on every side. Within Judah, the house of David is terrified, shaking like leaves in the wind. What does Judah feel she needs? A king who will be stronger, crueler, and more implacable than any other! And what is the vision Isaiah gives? A vision of a child (9:6)! He sees a child-king who will be wise, perceptive, and righteous, a child who will bring in a kingdom where no one hurts or destroys (11:9; see also 65:25). God's solution to the cruelty and oppression of the world is not to be more cruel and oppressive, but, as 52:13–53:12, the last of the so-called Servant Songs, shows, it is to take that cruelty and oppression into himself and give back love. This is ultimate power. A similar view of the servant-king appears in 16:5 and 32:1–5.

The way in which the two Davidic monarchs Ahaz and Hezekiah are contrasted in chapters 7–39 reinforces this idea of servant king. In chapters 7–8 Ahaz is depicted as trusting in the power of the world to deliver him, refusing to submit his plans and ways to God. The result is destruction. In contrast, chapters 36–38 show Hezekiah submitting himself to God and calling on his people to do likewise. The result is deliverance, both for the nation and for Hezekiah personally. Ahaz, who speaks pious words but refuses to bow in the servant posture, is contrasted with Hezekiah, whose prayer shows an overriding concern for the honor and name of his Lord (37:16–20). Thus, chapters 7–39 depict a God who has the power to care for his servants and the compassionate heart to actually do so.

The kingly servant is presented especially in chapters 40–55. That he is the king is shown in the functions ascribed to him. Both in 42:1 and 49:6 it is made plain that this Servant of the Lord will do the very things said of the Messiah in Isaiah 9–11; 16; and 32. He will bring justice and salvation to the nations. Yet, how will he do this? He will do it by laying aside the robes of pomp and royalty. He will submit to cruelty and abuse; he will be discouraged and despairing; he will finally give his life. He will become the Servant of both Israel and the world. In so doing he will become the ideal Israel (49:3), who makes it possible for the actual Israel to become the servants they were chosen to be. He becomes both the motive and the means whereby Israel can, out of the fires of judgment, fulfill its calling.

The motivation to servanthood is the unmerited grace of God in restoring his people to himself after they have brought destruction and rejection on themselves and his willingness to use them as his evidence in his legal suit against the gods (e.g., 43:8–13). This gracious refusal to cast them off provides the motivation to exercise the trust that was so amply demonstrated and explained in chapters 7–39. But how can God do this? How can God take sinful Israel back? How can sinful Israel become servant Israel? The means is the Servant. In his atoning death he provides the means whereby both love and justice can be satisfied (53:10–11).

But the ministry of the king is not exhausted in chapters 1–55. What about these servants when they are restored to their land? It was not the power of Babylon that sent them into exile. It was the pervasiveness of their sin and unrighteousness. What is to be done about that behavior? Is the only power of the kingly servant's death to forgive sin? Can the servants of the Holy One continue in sinful living? The answers to such questions are found in chapters 56–66, which talk about the character of servanthood. Here, on the one hand, God makes it clear that grace is not a justification for unrighteous living. He expects his servants to live righteous lives. But, on the other hand, the servants confess their inability to live the kind of righteousness God calls for. They cannot produce the light for which the world yearns.

What is to be done? Once again, the answer is the Servant. But this time he is presented as the mighty Warrior (59:15b–21; 63:1–6). The enemies he destroys are no longer the oppressive nations. Babylon is gone, and Persia is not a threat to God's promises. No, the enemy that the Warrior attacks with implacable fury is the enemy of sin in the hearts of the servants. As a result of his work, the light of God dawns on his people, and all the nations are drawn to it (chs. 60–62), just as 2:1–5 predicted. Interestingly, at the center of chapters 60–62, between the two Warrior passages and at the center of chapters 56–66, we have one more view of the Spirit-anointed Servant (61:1–3). Here he is not the terrifying Warrior, but One who speaks comfort and peace. In other words, *servant* is his nature while *warrior* is one of his roles. Nevertheless, he makes it plain that his function is to make persons "oaks of righteousness" (61:3). Whether it be by quiet persuasion or terrifying glory, he intends to make the servants of God like God.⁴⁵

Trust and Rebellion

As MENTIONED ABOVE, trust is a major theme of chapters 7–39. Interestingly, rebellion is a major theme in chapters 40–66, which are usually associated with hope.⁴⁶ The connection between the two is established in chapter 1, where the people are identified as rebels no less than five times (1:2, 5, 20, 23, 28). They are clearly told the contrasting results of these two behaviors in 1:19–20: Be willing and obedient and eat the best of the land, or rebel and be eaten by the sword.

After chapter 1, specific occurrences of terms for rebelliousness are scattered (3:8; 24:20; 30:1; 31:6; 36:5), but the last one is the most telling. The Assyrian officer stands outside the walls of Jerusalem demanding the surrender of the city. Speaking for the Assyrian king he says, "On whom are you *depending*, that you *rebel* against me?" We can either trust the nations and rebel against our true Lord, or we can trust the Lord and repudiate all the false alliances that cannot supply what they promise.

This is the way in which chapters 7–39 develop the theme of trust. Chapters 7–12 and 36–39 stand in contrast to each other at the beginning and end of the unit. In chapter 7 Isaiah challenges Ahaz to trust God instead of the nations. Ahaz refuses to do this, choosing instead to trust his worst enemy, Assyria. Isaiah says that Assyria will turn on Judah and destroy it, but that after the destruction has come God will restore his people again under the leadership of a Davidic monarch who will value the well-being of his people above his own skin. Thus, the real trustworthiness of God will be demonstrated (see 12:1–3). Chapters 13–35 explore whether it is God or the nations who is supreme. In various ways these chapters assert the lordship of Yahweh over the nations, concluding in chapters 34–35 that if we trust the nations, we will end up living in a desert, but that if we will turn to God even then, he can make that desert blossom like a rose.

After those lessons Ahaz's son Hezekiah is put to the test again. Now Isaiah's prediction to Ahaz has come true: Assyria is destroying the land and is about to complete the task by taking Jerusalem. Will Hezekiah pass the test his father failed? The answer is "yes, but." In the crisis of the Assyrian threat, Hezekiah dares to defy the Assyrians and trusts God, and he is delivered. So also when he is fatally ill, he turns to God and is delivered. But in the much more subtle crisis when the Babylonian ambassadors come to congratulate Hezekiah after his recovery (ch. 39), he fails, parading his wealth and armaments instead of giving the glory to God.

The Ahaz unit begins in no trust and ends in joy, whereas the Hezekiah unit begins in trust and ends in grief, with Isaiah predicting the Babylonian conquest.

What happened? Perhaps the point is this: Hezekiah has provided the positive illustration for the previous lessons: God can be trusted. At the same time, he provides a negative illustration that has a foreboding of the future: Trust is a way of life, not a one-time panacea. At various points the people of Judah turned back to God, yet these moments of trust did not become the settled pattern of their lives. So chapters 7–39 have taught the truth theoretically. All that needs to be said on the subject has been said, and its truth has been amply demonstrated. Yet the lesson has not been applied in an ongoing practical way. Hezekiah illustrates both of these points.

What can actually motivate the servants of the Lord to make trust a way of life, to lay aside the pride and self-interest in a life-changing trust? This was already intimated in 12:1–3. When God delivers his people from the justly deserved consequences of their sin, they will turn to him in trust. But will they actually do so, or will they persist in rebellion? This is the burden of chapters 40–66 in their twenty references to rebellion. God has forgiven their rebellions and will continue to forgive those who turn away from that rebellion to put their trust in him.

But will they turn away? Their fathers were rebels, and they themselves are rebels. The sin problem is not merely wrong acts but a way of thinking about and relating to the supreme Lord of the universe. If we will relate to him in submission and trust, all the treasures of heaven are ours. But if we will not, then the day will come when those who do trust him will see the destruction of us who persist in revolt (66:24). Thus the book ends on the same note with which it began: Surrendering to the Creator-Redeemer in trust is the height of wisdom, whereas rebellion against him is the height of folly.

Arrogance and Humiliation

THIS PAIR OF themes is closely related to the previous one. The primary reason for not submitting to God in trust is human pride, and the primary reason for trusting the nations instead of God is the power and glory of the nations. But human pride, power, and glory are all illusory. They are

derived from the only One in whom true power and glory reside. As Isaiah heard in his inaugural vision, "the whole earth is full of his glory." If there is any glory in the world, says Isaiah, it is derived from the Creator of the world. Thus, for humans to arrogate that glory and act as if it was their own rather than a gift is to be living a lie. And like all lies, it must inevitably betray its perpetrators.

No place in the book is this more powerfully presented than in 2:6–4:1. Here the prophet shows how all attempts to exalt ourselves are doomed to fail. In fact, the very attempt to exalt ourselves will be the cause of our humiliation. This is profoundly true, because by denying that there is a Creator who is sovereign over us, we make ourselves the most significant beings in the universe. And if we are the most significant beings in the universe, then there *is* no significance in the universe. This is the story of the Enlightenment in the West. We placed human reason on the throne in the nineteenth century, and it led us to bloody trenches, death camps, and addiction to mindless pleasures in the twentieth century. Isaiah saw this 2,500 years ago when he cried out, "The eyes of the arrogant man will be humbled, and the pride of men brought low; the LORD alone will be exalted in that day" (2:11; cf. 2:17); and, "Stop trusting in man, who has but a breath in his nostrils. Of what account is he?" (2:22).

These themes recur throughout the book. God alone is high and lifted up, and everything else will be brought down. In this respect idolatry is mocked relentlessly. The attempt to exalt humanity by making God in our image is utterly ridiculous. In fact, it makes humanity worthless (41:24; 44:9). By contrast, God delights to exalt those who recognize the truth of existence and gladly humble themselves before him. The prototype of this is the Servant who humbles himself even to death, but whom God declares to be high and lifted up, like himself (52:13; cf. 6:1). In the same way 57:15 says that the Lord dwells in the high and holy place *and* with the humble and lowly. Like some of the other themes, this one is brought to a climax in chapters 56–66, where those who attempt to exalt themselves through ritualistic religion and pious behavior are treated with contempt, while those who take the lower place, humbly attempting to obey God's covenant in its full implications, are commended and encouraged (see esp. 65:11–16).

The Uniqueness of Yahweh

No book in the Bible treats this theme as forcefully as does Isaiah. From beginning to end the idea that God can be compared to the gods of the nations is ridiculed. He alone is exalted. There is no other. As already noted, this point is first made in chapter 2, where it is said that to worship such things is like worshiping bats and moles. It reduces a person to the rocks and holes of the earth. This would have been especially poignant since the gods were typically worshiped on the mountaintops and other high places. But as was said on the previous theme, the Lord is the only One high and lifted up.

This attack on the idols continues throughout the book. In chapter 19 Egypt's supposed wisdom is denigrated because of its worship of idols. In the conflict between Hezekiah and Sennacherib, it all comes down to whether the Assyrian emperor can treat Yahweh just as he has treated the gods of the other nations. Hezekiah rightly understands that the issue is not whether Judah can escape from the oppressor's clutches, but whether Judah's God is a different order of being from pagan gods. In the outcome, the answer is clear: Yahweh is not one more of the gods. Rather, he is the One who brought Sennacherib to Judah and who can send him home again.

But what if there should come a time when the Lord would not deliver his people from some other oppressor, such as the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar? Would that not disprove the whole point of the argument made so carefully in chapters 7–39? Would it not show that God may be superior to some gods, but not all? Anticipating that development and those questions, Isaiah answers them in advance. He represents the Lord as calling the Babylonian gods into court and challenging them to bring evidence proving that they are gods. He challenges them to explain past events and how those events will work out in the future. Then he sharpens the challenge, calling on them to show that even once they had specifically and correctly foretold a future event. And the captive Judeans are to be God's witnesses that he had indeed done that very thing in predicting the Exile, naming the deliverer and predicting a return from exile.

The point here is profound. The gods have no hope of doing this because they are a part of the cosmic system. Thus, they cannot have any idea where the system came from or where it is going. They are unable to foretell the events of history because they are a part of those events. But if there were a Creator who was not a part of the system, he could reveal his purpose in creating and what the final end of the creative process would be. Furthermore, he could direct the evolution of history, intervening in it at will. That is, of course, exactly what Isaiah claims. The God of Israel is the sole Creator of the universe, the Lord of history. Much the same point is made in chapters 24–27, although in a more poetic and less didactic fashion.

All of this means that it is foolish to be seduced by the glory of the nations into rebelling against God. Rather, God's servants are meant to submit to him trustfully and declare the glory of the only God to the nations. This is so because as the sole Creator, he is the sole Redeemer. When creation has lost its way, seeking its own glory and in so doing ensuring its own destruction, it is only the Creator of the system who can redeem the system. Certainly no idea or form created by the human mind can deliver us. When put that way, the idea is laughable. Can a person who has blundered into quicksand save himself by pulling up his feet? Of course not. Help must come from outside, or there is no hope. Isaiah declares that the Creator of the universe is a God of steadfast love, who can save us from ourselves and will, if we would only allow him.

The Nations

WE HAVE ALREADY spoken in some detail about the nations in connection with the other themes, but they are significant enough that they deserve special attention. As in the case of many other themes, Isaiah brings together in one book many of the things said about the nations elsewhere in the Old Testament. The result is a wholistic treatment not found elsewhere.

From the outset Isaiah insists that Israel has a responsibility to the nations. The nations are to learn the intentions and ways of the Creator by means of God's people. The placement of this teaching in chapter 2 almost at the beginning of the book highlights its importance to the writer. That importance is further underlined by the theme's appearance in the final chapter. There it is said that some of the remnant will be sent to the nations of earth to tell them whose glory it is that fills the earth, and some from those nations will come to bow down to God in surrender and trust. This is like the picture painted in chapter 25, where all nations are called to a feast prepared by God in which he will remove the shroud of death from the faces of all peoples (25:6–8). The response of the nations there is much like

that of redeemed Israel reported in 12:1–3: "Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the LORD, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation" (25:9).

But between the announcement of the responsibility and its achievement, there are many slips. Instead of trusting God, Israel trusts the nations. She sees the glory of the great empires and forgets the glory of God. The inevitable result is destruction by the very nations who were trusted (8:5–10). Whatever we trust in place of God must inevitably betray us. But God is supreme over the nations. As the prophet says in chapter 40, to him the nations weigh less than the dust on the scales; they are less than a drop of water in a bucket. And because Israel's God is supreme over the nations, all of them must come to his judgment bar (chs. 13–23; 47). Isaiah asks Israel in a rhetorical way why they would be overawed by nations who must give an account of themselves to Israel's God. Furthermore, how could they think that the nations could save them when the nations themselves must look to Israel's God as their only Savior? Why depend on horses and chariots from Egypt when they can have the Spirit of God (31:1–3)?

Having refused to trust God and thus having become captive to the nations, the Judeans must eventually be driven back to trusting in God. When they do so, they will find that God can deliver them from the nations. Even mighty Babylon will not be able to hold them. They will return home with shouts of joy. And the nations will not only release them but will actually *bring* them home, as the nations come to worship Israel's God (60:14). Those nations who refuse to worship the one God in Jerusalem will be forced to serve God's people. The tables will be completely turned, with the former masters now becoming the servants and the former servants becoming the masters.

However, it is plain that this is not the end of the story of Israel's relations with the nations. God intends to remove the shroud of death from the face of all the peoples, and Israel's responsibility is to make that a possibility by declaring God's glory and saving power to all the world (12:4–5; 66:19–23).

Righteousness

THE MASCULINE AND feminine noun forms of the Hebrew root commonly translated "righteous" (sdq) appear in the book of Isaiah sixty-one times (cf.

twelve occurrences in Jeremiah, twenty-two in Ezekiel). Clearly, this is an important idea for the writer. Moreover, the terms are spread fairly evenly throughout the book. This means it has importance for all three of the theological emphases the book contains. As is the case with several of the other themes, this one is given special prominence in chapter 1, occurring three times between verses 21 and 27. This point continues to be made throughout the first part of the book: God expects his people to live righteous lives; if they do not, judgment will come upon them *in order that* they may be purified and live such lives (1:21, 26, 27).

Five words with the sdq root occur in chapters 32–33, where it said that righteousness will characterize the messianic kingdom in which the Spirit is poured out. Isaiah 33:14–16 is particularly instructive in that it makes it plain this is not a forensic or judicial righteousness but one that represents a specific kind of behavior:

"Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire?
Who of us can dwell with everlasting burning?
He who walks righteously
and speaks what is right,
who rejects gain from extortion
and keeps his hand from accepting bribes,
who stops his ears against plots of murder
and shuts his eyes against contemplating evil—
this is the man who will dwell on the heights."

Yet the people of Isaiah's day and after did not achieve that standard. The result was as God had predicted: destruction. But this leaves an unanswered question for those on whom the destruction would fall: "Since we have failed to be a righteous people and have brought God's just wrath upon us, how can there be any hope for us?" Again in this case, as with several of the other themes of the first part of the book, God seems to have inspired Isaiah to address that question, which future readers would have.

In chapters 40–55 "righteousness" undergoes a dramatic change. It is no longer the righteousness of the people that is in focus but the righteousness of God. How can a people who have utterly failed to be righteous hope to receive the blessing of God's continued promises? *Only through God's*

righteousness. But what is God's righteousness in regard to his captive people? Here it is important to recognize that "righteousness" in the Bible is more than a synonym for "justice." God had treated the people justly in delivering them over into the hands of the Babylonians. The Israelites had broken their solemn covenant with God again and again. Many years earlier Moses had warned them that such behavior would result in their being evicted from God's land, which they only held in trust. If righteousness was nothing more than justice, that would have been the end of any relation between them and God.

But righteousness is more than mere justice. It is to act in the "right" way. What is the "right" way for the God of all compassion to act? It is to have mercy, to be loyal to his subjects when they have not been loyal to him, to keep his promises when there is no more legal reason to do so. Thus, God could not in righteousness leave his people in captivity. Did they deserve to be delivered? No. Did they change and live such righteous lives that God was compelled to deliver them? Not at all. Ezekiel makes this plain in Ezekiel 36 when he says God is not delivering them for their sakes, as though they deserved such deliverance (36:22; see also Isa. 46:12). No, they will be delivered solely as an expression of the righteousness of God. They will be accounted righteous because of the righteousness of God coming to them through his righteous Servant (Isa. 53:11). The only prerequisite was that they believe God's promises and take advantage of his offer of deliverance when it came.

But what does this mean for the life of God's servants? A deadly conclusion could be drawn from the sequence recounted above. The reasoning would go something like this: It is impossible for me to achieve God's standard of righteousness in my behavior; if I depend on my performance to maintain a relationship with him, I will fail, and there is nothing but judgment and destruction ahead for me; God has delivered me from that judgment solely as an expression of his own righteousness; therefore, it does not really matter whether my life is characterized by righteousness or not; I should espouse it and work toward it, but all the time knowing that I cannot achieve it and that it does not really matter in the end. Those familiar with the book of Romans will know that it is precisely this line of reasoning that Paul attacks in chapters 6–8 of that book. The conclusions he draws are remarkably similar to those found in the book of Isaiah.

In chapters 56–66, there is an interesting blend of the two uses of righteousness seen in chapters 1-39 and 40-55 respectively. On the one hand, the prophet makes it clear in no uncertain terms that God's standards for the behavior of his servants have not changed from that put forward in the first section. God's servants are to have ethics like his, period. Note 56:1, "Maintain justice and do what is right." This is not a forensic or judicial righteousness, where we are accounted righteous regardless of our behavior. Furthermore, if there were any remaining question, it is immediately dispelled in the shocking illustration that the prophet uses in the immediately following verses (56:3–8). Who is the true servant of God? A restored descendant of Abraham who has been delivered by the grace of God and is reveling in his or her imputed righteousness? No, it is a foreigner or a eunuch who lives a life of obedience to the covenant of God. In the Torah, foreigners and eunuchs might not even enter the temple, let alone participate in the covenant, so the prophet is clearly using shock tactics to underline his point. The marks of servanthood are a life of righteousness like God's (so Rom. 6).

But here we are between the proverbial irresistible force and immovable object. God requires us to be righteous, yet experience shows us we cannot be righteous on his standards. This poignant dilemma is represented twice in this section: in 56:9–59:15a and again in 63:7–65:16. In both of them, the prophet takes up the voice of the people and laments as one of them over their persistent inability to do what is required of them. Far from bringing the light of God's righteousness to the nations, they grope in self-induced darkness (see esp. 59:9–15a). Here we are reminded irresistibly of Romans 7, where Paul in the same way takes up the lament of his reader over the inability to do what is right.

So what is to be done? Are the servants of the Lord condemned to a life of frustration, giving assent to God's requirements for righteousness in their minds, while all the time doing the very things they know God hates? Not at all! Here Isaiah artfully blends together the points of chapters 1–39 and 40–66. How are we to fulfill the righteousness called for in chapters 1–39? By means of the righteousness of God, which was revealed in chapters 40–55. God himself will defeat the enemy of sin and enable us to live lives of righteousness before the world. To be sure we cannot do this in our strength, and any attempt to do so is simply to relapse into pride and arrogance. But those who humbly admit their helplessness and cast

themselves on the provision of God in Christ will be able to live the kind of life God requires. Here we come to Romans 8.

As mentioned above, it is the divine Warrior who comes to defeat this last enemy (59:15b–21; 63:1–6). He must do this work alone, there being none to help him; but having done it as an expression of his own righteousness, it is now possible for the light of the Lord to shine forth on the world through his servants (61:1–62:12). Isaiah 63:1–6 especially uses the defeat of the nations as a figure for the victory of the Warrior. Both the historical and literary context make it clear this is a figure of speech. Historically, this material is addressed to the returnees who have already been delivered from the nations; Edom, the specific subject, has already been destroyed and poses no threat to Judah at this time. No, the enemy is the sinful behavior of the servants, which prevents them from being the light-bearers God intends.

The literary structure of this section (chs. 56–66) further underlines this point. It is arranged in what is known as a chiastic format. That is, the units at the beginning and end of the section parallel each other, the next units inward parallel each other, and so forth until the climactic unit is reached in the center. In this case the outer units speak of faithful and believing Gentiles (56:3–8; 66:18–24); the next units deal with the inability of God's people to do righteousness (56:9–59:15a; 63:7–66:17); the next contain the announcement of the divine Warrior's victory over the enemy (59:15b–21; 63:1–6); the next describe Jerusalem's light to the world (60:1–22; 61:4–62:12); and the climactic one (61:1–3) presents the Messiah, the servant king, who delivers his followers and defeats their enemies, *so that* they may be "oaks of righteousness for the display of his splendor."

The Relevance of the Book of Isaiah Today

LIKE ALL THE books in the Bible, Isaiah has a remarkable relevance to all times and circumstances. One of the evidences that the Bible is the revelation of God is this amazing combination of timeliness and timelessness. Persons from diverse cultures, economic circumstances, and time periods pick it up and find it speaking directly to them. Obviously, some books will speak more forcefully in some times and settings, and others in others. But the impact of the whole is always remarkable.

Because of both its breadth and its depth, Isaiah is even more perennially relevant than some other books, such as Obadiah or Nahum, which tend to be "one-issue" books. Isaiah has something for everyone. What does not speak to one person will be powerfully meaningful to another, and something one may have glossed over at one point in his or her life springs off the page in another. Here I want to point out some of the things in Isaiah that I believe have special significance for the present day.

The Uniqueness of Yahweh

I DO NOT BELIEVE there is any question that this concept is the most significant for our day. We live in an age where exclusivism of any sort is close to being the unpardonable sin. Tolerance is the rule of the day, except that intolerance of those who insist on the possibility of absolute truth is not only permitted but encouraged. Syncretism is encouraged so that it is understood that all religions are equally valid as expressions of each worshiper's personal preference. What is masked in all of this is that it represents an adoption, whether conscious or unconscious, of a worldview that has profound consequences for human life.

In fact, all of the myriad ways of thinking about reality can be grouped into just two categories: Either ultimate reality is an intrinsic part of the psycho-socio-physical universe, inseparable from it, or ultimate reality is somehow separate from, other than, that universe. All of the religions of the ancient world except one, and all the religions (and philosophies) of the modern world except three, fall into that first category. "God," whatever "god" may be, is the world as we know it; there is nothing else. What are the implications of such a view? They are strikingly similar around the world, because we are explaining ultimate reality by analogy with this world. Some of those implications are these:

- 1. There is no ultimate meaning in life. Our existence is an accident. Thus humans are finally without value.
- 2. There is no goal in life. We came from nothing, and we go to nothing. The only law is survival for the maximum time possible.
- 3. Conflict between destructive forces (evil) and constructive forces (good) is both endless and inevitable.

- 4. Ethics are always relative. The only enduring "good" is a maximum of comfort, pleasure, and security.
- 5. Self-interest is paramount.
- 6. In view of the preceding, the acquisition and use of power is of maximum importance.
- 7. Because there is an element of spirit power that is beyond physical manipulation, we must find "spiritual" ways to tap into that power. Since the entire universe is connected, it is possible through use of correct technique to become identified with those spirit powers and have their power at one's own disposal.
- 8. Human behavior is largely determined by forces outside of human control or understanding. Furthermore, the only reason for recording behavior is self-serving, so careful attention to actual events is insignificant. Therefore, history writing as an attempt to understand human behavior is both fruitless and pointless.

In all the ancient world, there was only one people who systematically and consistently denied all of the above: the Israelites. Sometimes a people might deny one or two for a period of time, but inevitably they fell back into the overall system. But the Israelites did not. They too felt the tug of this way of looking at reality, and again and again they adopted one or another of its implications. Yet they were always called back until, in the postexilic era, the opposing tenets to every one of these began to become second nature to them. What are these opposing tenets?

- 1. We were created in the image of a good and consistent God to be the stewards of his creation under his lordship. Therefore, human life is of ultimate value.
- 2. We are called to share the character of God, and yet we can choose not to. Thus it is possible both to progress toward and regress from the ultimate goal of experiencing his life.
- 3. The Creator is the Good. There is no conflict in him. Evil is not a cosmic reality but simply the absence of the Good in our

lives.

- 4. The character of the Creator is the absolute standard of ethics, against which all behavior may be measured.
- 5. Surrender of one's self-interest into the care of the Creator is the most personally beneficial thing one can do.
- 6. Acquisition of right standing with the Creator is the most important thing one can do.
- 7. The attempt to gain spiritual power through the use of technique apart from submissive, obedient relationship is strictly forbidden.
- 8. Human behavior can be evaluated according to a consistent standard. Furthermore, it is possible to record that behavior with accuracy and integrity. Therefore, history writing is an important key to understanding human behavior.

Why did the Hebrews alone stubbornly hold to these concepts, which became the foundation of all of Western culture? It is because they held a different view of reality from all their contemporaries. They alone believed that God is not the world. They alone believed that deity, humanity, and nature are not all parts of one indivisible whole. That view is nowhere better expressed in the Bible than in Isaiah. The technical term for this concept is *transcendence*. If God is the ultimate reality behind all things, then there is only one such reality. And if there is only one reality who created the world as an expression of his will and purpose, then to give ultimate obedience to anything else is ultimate disaster.

Such a being cannot be manipulated by means of any created thing; to even think of it is laughable. So how do we acquire his power so that we can meet our needs? That is just it: We cannot. We must entrust the satisfaction of our needs into his hands, believing that he really is true and good and that we are precious to him. That has been the sticking point with humans ever since our first mother and father. We are afraid to entrust our fragile selves into our Maker's hands. We believe the lie the first rebel told them and us: God is not for you; he wants to use you to satisfy his own self-interest. Fearing to surrender, we create gods in our image, foolishly

believing the lie that somehow we can gain power to use for ourselves and never have to surrender.

If the Western world is to survive, we must recover our spiritual roots in the Bible, and there is no book in the Bible that makes those roots more clear than does Isaiah. Somehow we must remind ourselves that the "inclusive" worldview will not help us to become more human but less. To be sure, there is a sinful "exclusivism" that is nothing more than arrogance. That is not biblical faith. Nevertheless, the only basis for human worth is in the biblical understanding that all of us share the image of the one Creator. To embrace some wooly-headed syncretism is not to come closer to righting the wrongs of the world; it is to lose the very basis for saying there is a right and a wrong. In that world the only right is the will of the person who can shout the loudest and hit the hardest. That is not the way of hope.

But suppose, as some think, the battle for the soul of the West is already lost. If so, it becomes doubly imperative for contemporary believers to know the truths of Isaiah. When we are called "bigots" and "closed-minded," we must know in our own souls why that is not the case. And when it becomes expensive and inconvenient to maintain this faith, we need to be able to know why we should maintain it anyway. There are no better resources for this than the ones we find in the book of Isaiah.

Servanthood

WE LIVE IN an age that, because of its abandonment of the biblical worldview, has made status, position, and power the absolute good. A major function of education has become not the acquisition of knowledge but the enhancement of self-esteem. The irony in all of this, as was argued above, is that in the unbiblical worldview, humanity has no significance whatsoever. We are an electrochemical accident. Thus, the more we cut ourselves off from the transcendent Creator, the less significant we become. The result, as is clearly seen in Camus, Sartre, and Kafka, is a downward spiral of despair. The more we try to puff ourselves up by cutting ourselves off from God, the less there is to puff up.

How desperately we need to hear the words of Isaiah, who tells us that the way to significance is not through arrogance but through humility, not to demand that others serve us but to serve others. How much we need to recover from Isaiah the prototype for what the apostle Paul called "the mind of Christ." This "mind" or attitude is almost completely foreign to us fearful children of Adam and Eve. We are so afraid of loss, of discomfort, of pain that we will sacrifice almost anything, or anyone, to avoid them. Yet, as Isaiah shows us, the way to real power is through powerlessness.

If we are to believe that, we need to be steeped in Isaiah's teaching. We need to be reminded again of the folly of depending on human glory for anything lasting. We need to hear again that God can be trusted—trusted enough to lay down our own foolish pride. We need to be motivated in deep ways by the realization that the sole Creator of the universe, the just Judge, the betrayed Father, has not cast us off but has chosen us to be the evidence to the world that he alone is God. We need to learn again that his honor before the world is so precious that it is worth any price to him to find a way to renew his character in us.

How desperately modern Christians, who have allowed their ways of thinking to be reshaped according to the wrong model, need to allow Isaiah's view of servanthood to reshape our outlook. The cross is still foolishness to the Greeks. To win is to lose? To lose is to win? To die is to live? To live is to die? To rise is to fall? To fall is to rise? To take the lowest place is to sit with the King? To take the highest place is to sit in the dust? Come on! Yet, as we who have found God in Christ know, all that is absolutely true. But how are we going to believe that unless we consciously allow our minds to become saturated with that point of view? If we do not, the other understanding of reality will take us by default.

The Lord of History

Considered simply as a philosophy, transcendence has some serious weaknesses. This is why, apart from perhaps Confucius and Aristotle, it has rarely been considered seriously by philosophers. In the first place, anything that is utterly removed from the psycho-socio-physical universe would have no contact with that universe and could not communicate with it. Thus, transcendence would seem to be an interesting and perhaps useful mental construct, but it would have no relevance to everyday life.

Both the Greeks and Confucius sought for a way around this by positing the existence of certain norms in life that reflect the activity and nature of this transcendent element, which Aristotle called "the Unmoved Mover" and Confucius called the "Tao" or "Way." Why is it that no culture where everyone lies or everyone steals can long survive? Is it not because there is a single, transcendent originating force behind all cultures? This argument seems to have been more persuasive in China than it was in Greece, because the following of "the Way" became a major cultural force through a great part of China's history, whereas this way of thinking had largely died out in Greece by the beginning of the Roman period. But even in China the Tao had no means of intervening in the life of the world to right any wrongs that might be there.

This highlights the second serious weakness of transcendence: the necessary impersonality of the originating force. One of the characteristics of human personality is its transitoriness. Our moods flit back and forth like hummingbirds. So do our affections and even our convictions. Surely the element from which all things extend and which forms the foundation of all that is could not have those characteristics. Furthermore, that force must of necessity be completely unconcerned with our response to it. It determines all things and is not itself determined by anything. All of this is much too ethereal and cerebral for most people caught up in the business of daily life, trying to survive for another day.

The other worldview, that of continuity, seems to offer a much more useful and practical way of understanding the way things are. Here the forces of the universe are given personalities on the analogy with us humans. But a study of mythology convinces one that the forces are forces still, only wearing masks that give them the illusion of personality and approachability. But behind the masks they are just as inscrutable and implacable as any "Unmoved Mover." What the overlay of human personality does give them is an element of capriciousness and arbitrariness that is not good news.

So how do we arrive at the biblical view, which is definitely not the worldview of continuity, but neither is it the same kind of transcendence as has just been described? If we ask the Hebrews where they got their concept of God, they will tell us that they did not get it either by extrapolating from this world or by logical deduction. Instead, they tell us of a God who broke into their experience, revealing a distinct will for their behavior and calling them to submission and obedience. They tell us of a God who interacted with them in their choices and in the consequences of those choices, revealing a complex and many-faceted personality.

How can we ever find God, if he is truly transcendent? The answer is that we cannot. As the New Testament says it, "No one has ever gone into heaven" (John 3:13). On this score the philosophers are right. But suppose the philosophers' logic is too limited. Suppose the transcendent One can retain his otherness while intersecting his world at any point and in any time. And suppose the problem of personhood is ours and not his. Suppose it is possible to be fully personal and yet entirely self-consistent. Suppose it is possible to interact deeply and faithfully with other persons and never yet vary from what One is in Oneself. This changes the question of knowing completely.

If such a being chose to, he could come to us, somehow translating himself into terms we could comprehend. For the One who spoke the universe into existence, that kind of translation should not be so hard. But what language should he use? Should he use the language of nature? How can he? How can nature convey personhood? How can nature convey an intended will? How can nature convey the necessity of surrender and obedience? How can nature convey ethical absolutes that are a concomitant of a loving, committed relationship? The language God chose was the language of human interrelationships, the language we call history. Why is it that the earliest examples of extended works of history are found in the Hebrew Bible? It is because that is the arena in which God chose to make himself known. In the arena of human relationships, choices, and decisions, God revealed his nature and character and the nature of reality to his people.

The Hebrews would deny that their creation of historical narrative betrayed any special perception on their part. Rather, they would tell us that God simply broke in upon them and called them to make certain choices, telling them what would be the consequences of the various choices. When they discovered that those consequences did follow, we can imagine that they said to themselves: "It would be a good idea to record this so that when we come this way again, we won't make the same mistakes again." That was precisely what God wanted. How could he teach them a complicated truth like monotheism, especially when all their more brilliant neighbors were polytheists? He could call them into a historical covenant relationship, whose first stipulation was that they must worship him alone. How could he teach them he was not a part of this world, an even more complex idea? He could make it a covenant stipulation that they not make or worship idols.

How could he teach them that there are absolute ethics? By requiring them to emulate the character of the one transcendent deity. Thus, their own historical experience became the basis for their knowledge of God.

All of this is portrayed for us in the book of Isaiah. There we see the truth of God being worked out in Israel's experience. Religion is not about mystic rites. Rather, it is about what you are going to do about the Assyrian threat. It is about how you treat the poor and downtrodden. It is about how you represent yourself and your God to foreign ambassadors. It is about how you continue to function when your entire life has fallen in on you, largely as a result of your own stupid choices. Religion is about ethics in daily life. This is the truth that is always in danger of being lost, and it is especially in danger now as the West progressively cuts its Christian moorings and all unconsciously drifts off into a pagan sea.

The study of history is dying around us. Why? Because such a study must believe that real choices are possible, that real progress toward a worthwhile goal may be made, and that there is a single overarching standard by which those choices may be evaluated and by which progress may be judged. Without these—and biblical transcendence is the only basis for them—the whole reason for studying the past at all is lost. The only thing that matters is me, now. Who cares what some old dead people did? As for learning from them, that's crazy. We all do what we have to do. The past is gone, and the future will be more of today, only maybe worse.

So what can counter these tendencies? A strong dose of the truth of Isaiah, that there is a God who is at work in the corporate history and in our individual histories. We can know him in the daily experiences of life, as the Israelites did. Knowing him in that way, we can then recover for ourselves, and maybe for our culture, the reality that human choices matter, that we are headed somewhere, and that the transcendent God is calling us to go with him.

Realized Righteousness

ONE OF THE chief values of studying the New Testament in the context of the Old is the corrective value of the Old. Many of the weaknesses in the church today are a result of misreading the New Testament because of ignorance of the Old Testament. For instance, the excessive individualism and privatism of the modern evangelical church is only possible if one is

almost wholly ignorant of the Old Testament. To be sure, the Old Testament cannot be read alone. To do so is to fall into the opposite ditch from the one into which exclusive New Testament readers fall. By reading the Old Testament alone, one can easily miss the love of God that is clearly there and come to see him only as an austere and implacable Judge. But when the two Testaments are read together, there is a wholistic, invaluable presentation of the truth.

Because Isaiah sums up so many of the Old Testament teachings, it is especially helpful in achieving a balanced theology. One of these areas of balance desperately needed today is in the area of realized righteousness. Modern evangelical theology has become dangerously one-sided, and this is especially apparent in American public life. At the same time that evangelicalism has become the dominant expression of Christian faith in America, public morality has collapsed. Is this only coincidental? I fear not. Reacting against the loss of a concept of personal salvation in the so-called mainline churches and an increasingly cultic mentality in the holiness movement, evangelical theology in the first half of the twentieth century put increasing emphasis on "imputed righteousness." That is, God calls us righteous because we have accepted the saving work of Christ on the cross. There was a strong reaction against "works righteousness" with its suggestion that one could somehow earn merit with God by doing good things. This understanding can be wonderfully freeing. We don't have to wonder whether our behavior is good enough to deserve a relationship with God; we can know we are his simply because we have accepted his offer of eternal life in his Son. This is genuinely good news.

But the problem with this overemphasis on "subjective righteousness" is that it cuts the nerve of "objective righteousness." The believer can easily feel that in the end his or her actual behavior is of little significance. If this is then coupled with a false idea of the security of the believer, the effect can be pernicious. We can essentially live in conscious sin, secure in the fact that God sees us as righteous and that we can never lose our salvation. Thus, we see persons in the highest offices in the land claiming to be "bornagain Christians" while living lives of conspicuous immorality and showing neither remorse nor repentance when caught. How we need to hear Isaiah's excoriation of such behavior! The people of God must manifest the life of God or give up the right to be called the people of God.

As always, the truth has two sides, and Isaiah makes this masterfully clear. On the one hand, it is true that in ourselves we are incapable of being righteous on the standard required of us by God. We are doomed to failure and deserve the condemnation that comes on that failure. We cannot bring ourselves to God by ourselves, and the failure of the good Hezekiah underlines that point. If we are ever to have a relationship with God, it must be on the basis of his grace alone. He must come to us as he did to the captive Judeans with words of comfort and grace, assuring us that he has not cast us off and that he has provided a means through his Servant whereby we may be restored to a life-giving relationship with our Father. That is one side of the truth, a side that dare not be lost.

But there is another side that equally dares not to be lost. This is the truth relating to the whole purpose of salvation. Why does God bring us into a relationship with him? A truncated view based on a misreading of the New Testament alone would say that it is so we can spend an eternity of bliss praising our Savior. This is an incredibly self-serving picture, both from a human and divine point of view. That is not, however, the New Testament teaching, as becomes clear when we read the two Testaments together. God calls us into a relationship with him so that his original purpose may be realized for us. What is that purpose? *That he might share his character with us.* This is obvious from the covenant. God's purpose in giving the covenant is so that the people might be holy as he is holy. Such holiness is not a cultic thing but a way of treating the world and other people.

As discussed above, Isaiah represents this point in a powerful way in chapters 56–66, where he synthesizes the demand for righteousness from chapters 1–39 with the offer of free grace in chapters 40–55. In chapters 56–66, Isaiah, much as Paul does in his letters, asks what that grace was for. Was it in order that God's people should revel in their chosenness while engaging in religious practices that were self-serving and ultimately perverse? Of course not! It was in order that they should live lives of justice and righteousness and in so doing become a lamp through which God's light should shine on the nations.

But how is that possible, given a long history of failure? It is possible through the same grace that restored you to a relationship with God in the first place. The demand is from God, but so is the provision. Clearly Isaiah is not promoting some arrogant claim to having arrived spiritually. Nor is he

suggesting that the believer's relationship with God is ever on any basis but divine grace. But he is saying that if a believer is not a conduit for the Holy Spirit's righteousness (32:15–16; 44:1–5), then he or she is missing a large portion of what the grace of God came to do.

Outline of Isaiah

I. Introduction: God's Servants, Now and Then (1:1-5:30)

- A. God's Denunciation, Appeal, and Promise (1:1–31)
- B. The Problem: What Israel Is Versus What She Will Be (2:1–4:6)
 - 1. The Destiny of the House of Jacob (2:1–5)
 - 2. The House of Jacob Forsaken (2:6–4:1)
 - 3. Israel Restored (4:2–6)
- C. A Harvest of Wild Grapes (5:1–30)

II. A Call to Servanthood (6:1–13)

III. Lessons in Trust—the Basis of Servanthood (7:1–39:8)

- A. God or Assyria? No Trust (7:1–12:6)
 - 1. Children, Signs of God's Presence (7:1–9:7)
 - 2. Measured by God's Standards (9:8–10:4)
 - 3. Hope for Restoration (10:5–11:16)
 - 4. The Song of Trust (12:1–6)
- B. God: Master of the Nations (13:1–35:10)
 - 1. God's Judgment on the Nations (13:1–23:18)
 - 2. God's Triumph over the Nations (24:1–27:13)
 - 3. The Folly of Trusting the Nations (28:1–33:24)
 - 4. Trusting God or the Nations: Results (34:1–35:10)
- C. God or Assyria? Trust (36:1–39:8)
 - 1. The Assyrian Threat (36:1–37:38)
 - 2. The Human Limits of Trust (38:1–39:8)

IV. The Vocation of Servanthood (40:1–55:13)

- A. Introduction: The Servant's Lord (40:1–31)
- B. Motive for Servanthood: Grace (41:1–48:22)
 - 1. The Servants of the Lord: His Witnesses (41:1–44:22)

- 2. The Lord Delivers His Servants (44:23–46:13)
- 3. The Lord's Testimony (47:1–48:22)
- C. Means of Servanthood: Atonement (49:1–55:13)
 - 1. Anticipation of Reconciliation (49:1–52:12)
 - 2. Revelation of the Means of Reconciliation (52:13–53:12)
 - 3. Invitation to Reconciliation (54:1–55:13)

V. The Marks of Servanthood: Divine Character (56:1-66:24)

- A. Human Inability (56:1–59:21)
 - 1. Humility and Holiness (56:1–57:21)
 - 2. Righteousness and Ritual (58:1–59:21)
- B. The Lord Has Glorified You (60:1–62:12)
- C. Divine Ability (63:1–66:24)
 - 1. Israel's Faithfulness; the Lord's Faithfulness (63:1–65:16)
 - 2. The Final Judgment (65:17–66:24)

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Text and Commentary on Isaiah

Isaiah 1:1-9

THE VISION CONCERNING Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

²Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth!
For the LORD has spoken:
"I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me.
³The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand."

⁴Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him.

Why should you be beaten anymore?
Why do you persist in rebellion?
Your whole head is injured,
your whole heart afflicted.
From the sole of your foot to the top of
your head
there is no soundness—
only wounds and welts
and open sores,
not cleansed or bandaged
or soothed with oil.

⁷Your country is desolate, your cities burned with fire; your fields are being stripped by foreigners right before you, laid waste as when overthrown by strangers.
⁸The Daughter of Zion is left like a shelter in a vineyard, like a hut in a field of melons, like a city under siege.
⁹Unless the LORD Almighty had left us some survivors, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah.

Original Meaning

THE OPENING NINE verses of Isaiah introduce the author and time of composition and summarize the charge of God and also of Isaiah against the people of Judah. As such, the verses open both the book and the introductory section (chs. 1–5). Many commentators believe that these chapters were put together after the rest of the book for the express purpose of introducing the finished whole. The unusual position of the prophet's call in chapter 6 may well support this contention. However, unless the "Branch of the LORD" in 4:2 refers to the Messiah, the absence of that theme does raise questions about chapters 1–5 having been consciously composed as a book introduction. It seems more likely that certain pieces were collected to introduce the main judgment-hope theme without trying to summarize everything in the book.

Verse 1 identifies the author of what follows and the time period in which he wrote. We know nothing more of Isaiah ben Amoz than what is mentioned in the book, though his easy access to the kings has suggested he may have been of royal blood.² The dates of the four kings mentioned extend from approximately 690 B.C. to 590 B.C., but chapter 6 makes it plain that Isaiah's ministry only began in the last year of King Uzziah, about 640

B.C. Jewish tradition has Isaiah being put to death by Manasseh, but there is no independent confirmation of this.³

The charges are those of rebellion (v. 2) and corruption (v. 4), which have resulted in desolation. Isaiah concludes (v. 9) that only because of the mercy of God does the land continue to exist at all. Verse 2 begins with formal-sounding language as God calls the heavens and earth to witness his charges. This is reminiscent of Deuteronomy 4:26, where Moses called heaven and earth to witness the promise that if the people persisted in sin, they would be expelled from the land of promise. Obedient nature is thus called upon to witness what God says about rebellious humanity.

This theme of obedient and responsive nature continues in Isa. 1:3, where Israel is said to be less intelligent than an ox or an ass that at least knows where the barn is. Israel does not know as much and persists in turning its back on its good Master even when its turning away results in its being beaten (v. 5).

In 1:5–8 Isaiah uses two graphic figures to depict the nation's spiritual condition. The first (vv. 5–6) is that of a bruised and wounded body that is left untended; the second (v. 8), that of an abandoned hut in a harvested field. The harvesters are gone, and the winter winds have blown away most of the odds and ends used to build the hut. That is what Israel is like. Yet for all of this, it seems Israel cannot put two and two together and come up with four. If only they would turn back to the Lord, he would gladly restore the blessings he had formerly showered on them. But it is a sign of the depth of their rebellion that even with the evidence of judgment all around them, they will not turn back.

Bridging Contexts

AT ITS HEART, this passage is about rebellion and ignorance—rebellion that brings about certain consequences and the *failure* to see the connection between an action and its consequences. Rebellion (*peša*^c) is at its heart a refusal to recognize boundaries. But by what right does "the Holy One of Israel" establish such boundaries (v. 4)? There are four reasons stated or implied in the passage.

(1) The first is that there is only one Holy One. In the ancient world, "the holy" defined that which pertained to deity. For Isaiah there was only *One*

who could be defined as holy. The things that Israel's pagan neighbors worshiped were certainly not holy. In fact, they were abominations (44:19). Thus, if there is only one real deity in the universe, that deity certainly has the right to draw some lines for the rest of the universe.

- (2) The Holy One is the Creator. He is the One who set up the boundaries of earth and heaven. Does he not have a right to establish boundaries for humans as well?
- (3) Next is the right of the covenant Lord. God has entered into a covenant relationship with humans. He has committed himself to us and in turn calls us to commit ourselves to him.
- (4) There is the right of the Father. Humans are not merely objects to God, nor are we merely subjects. We are his children (1:2), whom he loves and cares for. If he establishes boundaries, they are finally established out of love. When we rebel, it is against the only God, the sole Creator, the covenant Lord, and the heavenly Father.

Rebellion has consequences. Consequences for spiritual choices are as certain as consequences for physical choices. Just as a bruised and wounded body will die if left untended, and just as a lean-to will be blown down if not constantly maintained, so if we rebel against the Creator of the universe and reject his ways, spiritual corruption and death will follow. As intelligent human beings, we should be able to work that equation. Animals seem to know what is best for them, yet humans do not.

Contemporary Significance

WE HUMANS ARE an interesting lot. When we are offended, we want instant justice. But when we offend, we want complete mercy. We demand consequences when they are in our favor, but we want to avoid consequences when they are not. Beyond that, while we cannot deny there are largely inescapable consequences for physical behavior, we insist there are no comparable consequences for spiritual behavior. We are not offended by the "law" of gravity. We do not feel that our essential freedoms have somehow been infringed upon by the fact that if we jump off a forty-story building, we will do irreparable damage to ourselves. Yet if someone has the nerve to suggest that there might be comparable "laws" in the spiritual realm, such a person is treated as if he or she is profoundly evil.

Personal freedom has become an absolute good in the modern world, regardless of the obviously tragic results when it is pushed to its extremes. Studies show that the one common denominator in delinquency is the absence of a father. Yet males continue to imagine that they can father children whenever and wherever they like without consequences. At the same time, adults imagine they can have sex without restraints because they can always kill the unwanted consequences. Others among us imagine that they can acquire an endless string of material goods without any impact on their sense of priorities in life.

But Isaiah tells us there are standards for spiritual behavior that are just as consequential as those in the physical world. They have been established by the Creator of the universe and are never broken, only crashed up against. It is the Christians today who need to recover this truth, both for ourselves and for our children. We live in a society whose hostility to any kind of spiritual norms is so deep-seated and so pervasive that it comes out on every hand. We are in danger of imbibing it without even being aware of it, and our children more so. We must tell ourselves again and again that the Holy One has not created the law of marital fidelity any more arbitrarily than he has the law of gravity. Both of these laws simply describe the way he made us to function.

To require a railroad engine to stay on its tracks is not some infringement of its basic rights; it is merely to define the circumstance under which that machine must operate if its potential is to be realized. We must recover this kind of basic arithmetic of life. Why is it, for example, that all organized societies forbid lying? It is because for some reason no society where everyone lies can long exist. And why is that? Does it not argue that it reflects the nature of a creation where integrity (oneness) is a physical, emotional, and spiritual necessity? Yet our society has made pleasing oneself the absolute good when it says, "Oh, everybody lies once in a while. Don't be so narrow." But we hear Isaiah saying, "Why do you want to keep on smashing into that brick wall? God does not prohibit lying because he is some heavenly killjoy, but simply because that is the way he has made the world."

This underlines the necessity of the biblical doctrine of God. Is there a being in the universe who has the right in his essence (the Holy One), his nature (Father), his actions (Creator), and his relationships (covenant Lord)

to define the terms of our life? If so, rebellion is not merely the assertion of our right to be self-determining, but it is an offense against the very nature of our existence. But we ask, is this not merely to reduce us to robots who mindlessly follow the program that determines their behavior? And the answer is clearly no. Given the character of God as defined in the Bible and particularly in Isaiah, the alternative to rebellion is not mechanical obedience. For God has not prescribed every action for us. He has merely defined the outer limits beyond which we may not go without hurting ourselves. Just as the law of gravity does not render us mindless robots, neither does the law forbidding stealing.

Interestingly, some states in the United States still have laws on their books defining what sexual positions between a husband and wife are legal. There is nothing like that in the Bible. Live creatively within the general limits the Creator-Father has defined for you and there will be health, productivity, and joy.

Isaiah 1:10-20

¹⁰HEAR THE WORD of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the law of our God, vou people of Gomorrah! 11"The multitude of your sacrifices what are they to me?" says the LORD. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals: I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. ¹²When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? ¹³Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations— I cannot bear your evil assemblies. ¹⁴Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me;

15When you spread out your hands in prayer,
 I will hide my eyes from you;
even if you offer many prayers,
 I will not listen.
Your hands are full of blood;
 ¹6wash and make yourselves clean.
Take your evil deeds

I am weary of bearing them.

out of my sight!
Stop doing wrong,

17 learn to do right!
Seek justice,
encourage the oppressed.
Defend the cause of the fatherless,
plead the case of the widow.

18"Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD.
"Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.
19 If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land; 20 but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword." For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Original Meaning

ISAIAH FOLLOWS HIS opening charges by presenting two alternate ways of dealing with Israel's alienation from God, a wrong way and the right way. The wrong way, the way of hypocritical ritual, is described in 1:10–15; the right way, the way of repentance and changed living, is described in 1:16–17. Finally, the alternatives are summed up in 1:18–20. If we take the right way, we will enjoy blessing; if we take the wrong way, we will be destroyed.

One of the interesting features of the book is its transitions. For those who espouse multiple authorship, this is taken to be a sign of the way in which later editors have done their work. But it may also be an indication of a single mind at work, linking one thought to another. In this case, the link is the use of Sodom and Gomorrah in both verses 9 and 10. In verse 9, the author says that it is only because of the mercy of God that Israel and Judah

have not already been destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah were. In verse 10 he reinforces the comparison by calling the people he is addressing "rulers of Sodom" and "people of Gomorrah." If the people of Israel think they are immune from judgment because they are God's chosen people, they must think again. If their behavior is no different from that of the world, their fate will be no different either.

But the Israelites think they are entitled to favorable treatment because they have God's revealed way of doing offerings. If they will just do all the rituals more carefully, they think, God will have to avert the coming judgment and give them his blessings. God responds to such an idea with dripping scorn in verses 11–15. He does not want any more sacrifices and takes no pleasure in them (v. 11). Verse 12 is a rhetorical question whose answer has him saying he never asked for them to come before him in this way. Their gifts are worthless, their incense an abomination, and their worship services evil (v. 13). In fact, the whole thing has become too much for him to bear any more (v. 14). They may as well stop lifting their hands to him in prayer, because he won't even look at them, let alone listen to their prayers. Clearly, if God's people intend to take the way of increased religiosity as the way of solving their problems, they are taking a dead-end street.

Why? A clue appears in verse 15. "Your hands are full of blood." There is perhaps a bit of double entendre here. Yes, their hands are full of the blood of sacrifice, but they are also full of the blood of the innocent, whom they have abused or in whose abuse they have been implicated. God will not hear their prayers because their prayers are not matched by godly lives. They want God to bless them while they are the source of destruction and curse for those around them.

This becomes explicit in verses 16–17. The covenant in which the sacrificial laws appear is the same covenant where ethical treatment of one's neighbors is required. It is not possible to have the one and not the other. We cannot persist in evil deeds and expect ritual to deliver us from the consequences of those evil deeds. What God wants is right and just behavior, especially toward those who are helpless to demand such behavior on their own behalf: the oppressed, the fatherless, and the widow. Here is the true evidence that a person "knows" the Lord. Anyone can perform

rituals, but the person who acts like God is the person who has entered into a life-changing relationship with him, and that is clearly what God wants.

In verse 18 the reader is called to argue the case with God ("reason together" is a little weak). God is challenging us to do our best thinking. If one way of acting (rebellion and stubbornness) brings destruction (v. 20) and another (submission and changed living) brings not only forgiveness and restoration (v. 18) but all the blessings of life (v. 19), which choice makes the best sense? It seems as though even an ox or a donkey could figure that out (cf. 1:3)!

Bridging Contexts

SINCE WE NO LONGER offer sacrifices and most of us do not burn incense in our worship services, it may appear on first glance as if 1:10–15 have only limited relevance for modern readers. However, what this paragraph is talking about is very relevant—the human tendency to use religious behavior as a means of manipulating God for our own benefit. Around the world, this is the function of ritual, because it is believed, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously, that by performing such actions we can force God to do certain things.

This is very conscious in the worldview of continuity wherein actions performed in the human realm must of necessity be replicated in the divine realm and then in the natural realm. This is a great part of the appeal of ritualistic religion; it gives the worshiper the feeling of being in control and being able to procure for oneself the benefits one seeks. This was certainly the appeal of such behavior to the Hebrews. By contrast, treating other people, especially people weaker than we, in just and right ways seems to have no religious efficacy at all. It does not put God in our debt and seems to have no capacity for manipulating him. Perhaps we might earn some favor with him, but that is a precarious basis for trying to placate his anger. It requires that we simply surrender to him and trust him to keep his Word, a frightening position in which to put oneself.

But this is precisely the consequence of God's transcendence: He cannot be manipulated by any human activity. We cannot in some mechanical way force God to do something. He is not continuous with this world, and nothing done here requires him to do anything. But how, and why, does

treating the poor justly and rightly have any impact on our standing with God? For the Israelites it was because God required it in his covenant with them. If they were to experience the blessings their covenant Lord offered, then they had to agree to treat one another in ethical ways.

Why? Because this was his will, expressing his own nature and character. If God's people wanted to walk with him, they had to agree to act like him. This is where the connection lies for modern believers. Like the old covenant, which was written on tablets of stone, the new covenant, which is written on our hearts, calls on us to share the character of God. He offers us his favor; we cannot force him to give it to us. But if we are to receive that favor, we must be in the right kind of relationship to receive it. We cannot receive it if we refuse to walk in his way.

But were not the sacrifices part of the covenant requirements too? Yes and no. The requirements of the covenant are given in Exodus 20–23. In those chapters the statements about worship and sacrifice are general, while the ethical demands are detailed. The so-called "Manual of Sacrifice" only appears after the segment on the tabernacle (Ex. 25–40), and almost all the sacrifices described there (Lev. 1–7) have to do with unintentional sin. This placement and content are significant. The sacrificial system was not given for the purpose of procuring God's favor but as a means whereby those who have accepted God's grace and are keeping the covenant and enjoying the presence of God may continue to do so in spite of their unintentionally falling short of perfect performance. To attempt to use sacrifices to cover intentionally breaking the covenant of God was a terrible violation of what the covenant was all about.

Religious actions were to be a symbol of the heart condition. If the heart was not in an obedient and submissive posture before God, then all the sacrifices in the world would accomplish nothing. Nowhere in the Old Testament is this more clearly stated than in Psalm 51, where we read that God does not desire sacrifices; rather, the sacrifice he desires is the one of the broken and contrite heart. So why did he require sacrifices? Because we humans need a way of symbolizing spiritual realities. Trying to make the symbol stand in place of the reality is sin.

Contemporary Significance

THERE IS NO QUESTION that we today are as guilty of trying to use religious behavior to manipulate God as any Israelite was. How easy it is to think that when we go to church regularly, read the Bible, pray, tithe, and don't engage in substance abuse, God somehow owes us something. Moreover, how easy it is to think that when we have done all these things, God could hardly expect more from us. Look at all the heathen around us who do not do any of these things. God should be grateful to have such faithful servants as us, we think. Then, when difficulties come to us, we are angry at God, accusing him of being unfair after all we have done for him.

In fact, it is easy for these behaviors to become substitutes for real biblical faith. Real biblical faith, as both the Old and New Testaments show, lies in surrender and obedience as manifested in how we treat one another. Certainly Jesus' statement in John 13:35 is not meant to be all-inclusive. Nevertheless, its import is clear: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." It is not by our religious behavior but by our love. Paul makes the same point in 1 Corinthians 13. Note too that when the apostle describes the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22–23, he does so in entirely relational language.

As with the Israelites, our worship practices and religious activities are intended to be symbolic of deeper realities. There is no necessary connection between these and the realities. But there *is* a direct connection between those realities and our ethical behavior. We can be very religious and yet be living our lives for ourselves. We can give the appearance of obedience and yet be living a self-centered life that is nothing but rebellion.

In contrast, it is unlikely that a person will manifest consistent integrity, compassion, and self-denial in his or her dealings with others, especially those who can never repay what is given them, unless that person has surrendered to the love and grace of the God of the Bible. When we do meet persons who are acting in these ways but who give no testimony of faith, in almost all cases there is a Christian source of such behavior in a previous generation. But the point is this: God says that what we *must* show if we are to experience his favor is evidence of his life within us. Religious and cultic activity in the absence of a changed life is *not* such evidence.

Isaiah 1:21-31

²¹SEE HOW THE faithful city has become a harlot! She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her but now murderers! ²²Your silver has become dross. your choice wine is diluted with water. ²³Your rulers are rebels. companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless: the widow's case does not come before them. ²⁴Therefore the Lord, the LORD Almighty, the Mighty One of Israel, declares: "Ah, I will get relief from my foes and avenge myself on my enemies. ²⁵I will turn my hand against you; I will thoroughly purge away your dross and remove all your impurities. ²⁶I will restore your judges as in days of old. your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you will be called

²⁷Zion will be redeemed with justice, her penitent ones with righteousness.

the City of Righteousness,

the Faithful City."

²⁸But rebels and sinners will both be broken.

and those who forsake the LORD will perish.

29"You will be ashamed because of the sacred oaks in which you have delighted; you will be disgraced because of the gardens that you have chosen.
30 You will be like an oak with fading leaves, like a garden without water.
31 The mighty man will become tinder and his work a spark; both will burn together, with no one to quench the fire."

Original Meaning

THE PROPHET RETURNS from his call to repent to a description of the present (1:21–24) and to what the consequences of the present will be in the absence of repentance (1:25–31). He puts those consequences in perspective by saying that while the coming judgment will have a purging and renewing effect on the nation as a whole, individual sinners should not take false comfort from that. If they do not repent, they will be burned up like tinder.

The prophet describes the present situation in a series of contrasts between what the Lord intended and what he actually got. He intended faithfulness and got harlotry; he intended righteousness and got murder. Instead of silver he got dross; instead of pure wine, tasteless dilution. Instead of rulers he got rebels; instead of defenders of the helpless, takers of bribes. Here is the same definition of true religion as given above. True religion is to be faithful to God as demonstrated in a right and just treatment of others. It is not to be a dilution of godly and self-serving principles but a pure distillation of the former. Those in authority are to see themselves as

responsible to God for their care of the helpless and not in positions of privilege, where they may enrich themselves.

It is apparent that God's people considered themselves in a position of privilege. God had chosen them and promised to bless them. Indeed, he had blessed them. They had risen from a nation of slaves to become one of the significant empires in the ancient world. They had God's law, God's temple, God's city, God's land. God had a special commitment to protect them from any and all enemies. How it must have stung when Isaiah said that they were *not* God's favorites but his enemies, on whom he would be avenged (1:24)!

But God's judgment is never intended to be his last word. If the nation has become his enemies for the moment, that has not changed his ultimate intention for them. Thus, he does not intend to destroy Israel but to refine her. As the silver is melted in the crucible, so God intends to melt down the nation in order to "remove all your impurities." The fires of the Exile will be terrible and painful, but in giving his people over to that fate God is not abandoning them. Instead, he will use those fires to restore to Israel the kind of leadership they once knew in order that Jerusalem could indeed fulfill God's intention for it and become "the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City" (1:26).

Verse 27 shows an interesting double usage of "justice" and "righteousness." On the one hand, it is the justice and righteousness of God that will accomplish the ultimate redemption of Zion. But on the other hand, that justice and righteousness is available because people have repented of their own unjust and unrighteous behavior and have reaffirmed their willingness to emulate God's behavior.

This segment introduces a prominent theme of the book, that of "Lady Zion." While it is true that in the conventions of Semitic languages, cities were feminine by definition, more than that seems to be taking place here. In many ways Zion is seen to be the wife of Yahweh. The same imagery is to be found in Hosea (e.g., Hos. 9:1–2; etc.) and Ezekiel (e.g. Ezek. 16:8–19; etc.). Yahweh has betrothed himself to this lady, and he expects faithfulness and loyalty in return. Sadly, that is not the case. Zion has turned her back on her husband and has sold herself into harlotry. Not only has she entered into alliances with other nations; she has also entered into alliances with the gods of those nations. Yet in spite of that, God's love for his bride

has not changed. He intends to find a way to woo her back to himself (Isa. 49:15–21; 66:7–11; cf. Hos. 2:14, 19–20).

One of the characteristics of Isaiah is that no matter how promising his oracles of salvation may be, he never lets them give his audience a false comfort. The good news is only available to those who make a radical turnaround. The certainty of future hope is no justification for continuation in rebellion. In the present passage, those who persist in their rebellion *will* be destroyed (1:28); those who forsake the covenant they made with the Lord will have no hope.

Both the condition and the actions of these rebels are illustrated with the first occurrence of one of Isaiah's favorite images: trees. Sometimes it is difficult to know when the prophet is using such graphic elements as these literally and when he is using them figuratively. For instance, 1:29 may describe the literal actions of the rebels in worshiping idols. Oftentimes the idol sanctuaries were located in groves of trees. But 1:30–31 are clearly figurative. The proud rebels may think of themselves as towering trees, but if so, they are trees that have no water. In fact, they are just tinder waiting for the first spark to ignite and destroy them in a moment. This suggests that even 1:29 may be figurative, with the groves and gardens there being figurative of human pride and glory. In any case, the point is that the future promise for Zion should offer no comfort for those who will not repent.

Bridging Contexts

IF WE ASK what is the message of these eleven verses, three thoughts should be highlighted. (1) The first is the nature of true religion. Isaiah's perspective on this is much the same as that found in Deuteronomy, Micah, or James. Deuteronomy 10:12–13 instructs us "to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees." Micah 6:8 says it is "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." In James 1:27, the author calls us "to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

In other words, true religion involves two components: an affective one and a volitional one, a relational one and a performative one. We must have

- a love relationship with God that separates us from the world and changes the way we live, especially in respect to the helpless. What none of them suggest is that true religion is primarily a forensic position.
- (2) God wishes even well-deserved judgment to have a positive effect. God never considers judgment to be an end in itself. As Psalm 30:5 has it, "His anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime." We do not serve a God whose justice is like a steel trap: Do what is wrong, reap the consequences, and that is that. No, if God finally permits judgment on his people (and look how long he deferred it), even then he does not intend the fire to destroy but to purge, to purify. In the end, this was corrupt Judah's only hope. If they had been allowed to continue in their sin, they would have drifted off into just one more example of paganism. If they were ever to be God's people, bearers of his light to the nations, then the fire was inescapable.
- (3) Finally, Isaiah reflects on the danger of false security—his first occurrence of this recurring theme. This prophet is clearly concerned that when he prophesies good things for the future, the people will relax and conclude that they do not need to give attention to their terrible present behavior. This is one of the differences between a false prophet and a true prophet. The false prophet lulls his hearers into believing that all is well and that they do not need to deal with their persistent sinning. It is the ministry of encouragement run amok. The true prophet cares enough for his people to tell them what they don't want to hear. So Isaiah continually tells the people that the fact God will keep his promises to the descendants of Abraham and not let them be erased from the earth is no guarantee for any individual Israelite. They must repent from their sins now, or they will have no part in those promises.

Contemporary Significance

MUCH OF CONTEMPORARY evangelical theology constitutes a reaction against the so-called "social gospel" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. That "gospel"—that we should concentrate less on personal piety and more on changing the sinful structures of society—was itself a reaction against some of the excesses of the last half of the nineteenth century in which there was an almost neurotic fixation on personal holiness and

personal spiritual experience. In the 1920s and 1930s the social gospel reigned supreme, and fundamentalists responded by saying that all that was necessary to reform society was to save individuals.

Carl F. H. Henry addressed what he believed was the overreaction in evangelical circles with his landmark book, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*.² But that book is now more than fifty years old, and we need to hear its message again. Evangelicals as a group have moved out of the upper-lower class and are now largely in the upper-middle and in some cases in the upper class.³ Yet attempts to assist the helpless and the broken and our involvement in efforts to secure justice and righteousness in our society have not kept pace.

J. Edwin Orr, a student of revival movements, said in a lecture given at Asbury Theological Seminary in the late 1970s that he wondered if "the Jesus Movement" of that decade should really be classed as a revival. His reason for wondering was that all other revivals were immediately followed by social reform, but he saw no evidence of such a thing happening in this case. The succeeding two decades have sadly borne out his fears. With only a few exceptions, the 1980s and 1990s have not seen the evangelical church addressing the great issues of our day. Instead, we have been right in the midst of what Malcolm Muggeridge called "the Gadarene plunge" of our society into wealth, pleasure, and comfort.

So what should be our attitude in all of this? For almost two hundred years Christendom has been a dominant force in the West, especially in America. Now we see the church increasingly marginalized as a force to change society, even losing its ability to maintain its own identity. What should be our attitude? Surely Isaiah would say that we ought not to be trying to increase our power and influence. Nor should we be wringing our hands and crying, "All is lost." Rather, we should each be looking inward at our own lives and outward at a lost and broken world, confident God does not intend to harm us but aware he demands purity, selflessness, and love in all our relationships.

We should, of course, live courageously and self-forgetfully, knowing that the church will survive. Furthermore, we should not be discouraged when difficulties come. Whether we deserve them or not, God's good purpose is not to destroy us but to purify us. But neither dare we live in false confidence. The scriptural adage that "the soul that sins will die" is

still true. We should allow the Holy Spirit to purify us, and then we should lose ourselves in service to others.

Isaiah 2:1-5

THIS IS WHAT Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem:

²In the last days

the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it.

³Many peoples will come and say,

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob.

He will teach us his ways,

so that we may walk in his paths."

The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

⁴He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples.

They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nation will not take up sword against nation,

nor will they train for war anymore.

⁵Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD.

Original Meaning

AFTER THE GRIM ending of chapter 1 and indeed the generally grim tone of that entire chapter, these verses come as a shock. They do not speak of the stubborn and rebellious Israelites worshiping in the groves of their self-adoration. Instead, we have all the nations streaming to "the mountain of the LORD"—that is, to his house, his temple, in Zion—to learn his ways. They go there because that is the place where God's Torah (NIV "law") and word go forth.

It is not clear why there is a second attribution of authorship in Isa. 2:1. Many believe that whereas the attribution in 1:1 is identifying Isaiah as author of the book as a whole, this one is specifically identifying him as responsible for chapters 2 through 5. This is more interesting since 2:2–4 is identical to Micah 4:1–3, and the verses seem to fit more naturally into their context in Micah than they do here. Perhaps the piece was something that existed independently, and both prophets made use of it.²

While the temple in Jerusalem was located on a hilltop, it was not the highest hill in the area, with even the neighboring Mount of Olives being higher. So what is the significance of the repetition of "mountain" with regard to the temple in these verses? Probably it has to do with the ancient belief that the gods lived on the high mountains. So Zeus was thought to live on Mount Olympus in Greece and Baal on Mount Cassius in northern Syria. What this text is saying is that while Zion may not be the highest of the mountains, it is still *the* mountain where the one true God is to be found. This is the mountain where humanity should seek God.

The reason they should do so at this place is because this is where God has revealed his ways to humans. Moreover, they are the same ways in which humans are expected to walk. In his Word, God has given instructions (*torah*) on how to walk in his ways. Thus, the nations do not come to Jerusalem for power or mystical union with the divine but in order to learn how the Creator intends his creations to live.

When the nations walk in God's ways, they will be submitting to his lordship. The concept of "judgment" in Hebrew (*šapaṭ*, Isa. 2:4) is larger than the parallel idea in English. In English it has to do primarily with the administration and enforcement of the law codes. While that is one part of the idea in Hebrew, there is much more to it. It involves the administration

of the world, the establishment of governmental order. Thus, the expected outcome of God's Word among the nations is harmony. The One who created the world order will now put that order into practice, and just as individuals who submit to God no longer need to resort to violence in order to have their needs met, neither will the nations.

Some ask when Isaiah anticipated that this pilgrimage to Jerusalem would take place. But that might be the wrong question. Perhaps he is merely making a theological point about the universal significance of the truth that had been revealed to Israel. It may be that he did not have in mind one particular event; rather, he foresaw many ways in which the message of the Torah could and should have impact on the world around.

It is not just any god who is doing this, but the "God of Jacob" (Isa. 2:3). He is the God who has revealed himself in the context of the history of a particular people. He has condescended to become involved in the specifics of their lives in order that the world may know him and be redeemed. If that is true, then there is all the more reason why the family ("house") of Jacob (2:5) should walk in the light of the Lord. Thus, Isaiah produces another appeal for the people of Israel to live up to the truth that has been given them—the mission entrusted to them. If it is true that even the Gentiles will one day seek out God's ways so that they can walk in them, surely God's chosen people ought to be walking in those ways now.

Bridging Contexts

It is often debated whether Israelite religion was a "missionary religion," but passages such as this show that it was at least a universal religion. The writers of the Bible did not believe the Lord was a local deity on a par with Baal or Chemosh. They believed that he was the God of the whole world. Although this passage does not specify that the Hebrews were to actively reach out to the Gentiles, both Micah and Isaiah, by their use of these verses, make it plain they did believe God's "ways," as manifested in the Torah, were for all people and not just for themselves. The ethical standards of the covenant are the standards of the entire earth, because the God of Zion is the Creator of the earth and his character has been built into it. Living by those standards will produce a health, both physically and

relationally, that will draw people to them. And if those standards are followed in public life and private life by all peoples, wars will cease.

Contemporary Significance

THERE ARE TWO DANGERS with a passage like this. One danger is to take it too seriously, and the other is not to take it seriously enough. The danger of taking the passage too seriously is that we try to produce such a society here and now. Thus, across the centuries there have been attempts to create utopian societies where conflicts cannot occur. All of these have inevitably failed. But the danger in these failures is that we then simply relegate these promises to "the Millennium," thereby dismissing ourselves from any responsibility to see them fulfilled in any real way now.

So what is a middle way between these extremes? First of all, we must not lose sight of the universal character of the biblical faith. Today, we have come full circle from Isaiah's day. In his day it took a great deal of courage to say that *all* the nations would one day worship Israel's God. There were so many great deities in the world; how could the people of this little country of Judah dare to proclaim that their God is the one true God whom all would worship and that his ways are the ways in which all should walk? But they did proclaim such a thing. Because of their faithfulness, by the end of the nineteenth century A.D. it did not seem at all unlikely that the whole world would hear the good news of the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ in that generation.

Then came the twentieth century and the terrible spectacle of the Christian nations of Europe and America destroying one another in two world wars. And now we have come to the place where the very idea of Israel's God being the God of the whole world seems arrogant to many people, and the idea that there is a universal ethical standard is unthinkable. Christians too have been infected by this idea. We don't want to be thought arrogant and demanding. As a result, the numbers of young people giving themselves to foreign missions as a lifelong vocation has dropped alarmingly, as has giving money to fund such enterprises.

So what must we do? (1) We must reaffirm the truth of these promises: God is the God of the whole world. What is more, he is the *only* God of the whole world. We must not allow the world to define our faith for us.

Persons who can see a tree are not arrogant to correct the misperceptions of a tree on the part of someone who is blind. Neither are those who have received the revelation of God arrogant to tell someone who has not received it what is the true nature of life.

(2) As Isaiah pleaded with his people, we must put God's ways into practice in our own lives. We must start living lives of grace and nonviolence. We must start reaching out to the poor and the helpless. We must give up our lust for riches and power. Mother Teresa is a shining example. Was she able to stem the tide of sin in Calcutta? Reverse the mortality rate? Bring in utopia? No, to all three questions. Nevertheless, she was faithful in her day, and because of her many people from the world have been impressed to look more carefully at the ways of her God.

Isaiah 2:6-4:1

⁶YOU HAVE ABANDONED your people, the house of Jacob. They are full of superstitions from the they practice divination like the **Philistines** and clasp hands with pagans. ⁷Their land is full of silver and gold; there is no end to their treasures. Their land is full of horses: there is no end to their chariots. ⁸Their land is full of idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their fingers have made. ⁹So man will be brought low and mankind humbled do not forgive them.

10Go into the rocks,
hide in the ground
from dread of the LORD
and the splendor of his majesty!
11The eyes of the arrogant man will be
humbled
and the pride of men brought low;
the LORD alone will be exalted in that day.

12The LORD Almighty has a day in store for all the proud and lofty, for all that is exalted (and they will be humbled),
 13for all the cedars of Lebanon, tall and lofty,

and all the oaks of Bashan,

14 for all the towering mountains
and all the high hills,

15 for every lofty tower
and every fortified wall,

16 for every trading ship
and every stately vessel.

17 The arrogance of man will be brought
low
and the pride of men humbled;
the LORD alone will be exalted in that day,

18 and the idols will totally disappear.

19 Men will flee to caves in the rocks and to holes in the ground from dread of the LORD and the splendor of his majesty, when he rises to shake the earth.
20 In that day men will throw away to the rodents and bats their idols of silver and idols of gold, which they made to worship.
21 They will flee to caverns in the rocks and to the overhanging crags from dread of the LORD and the splendor of his majesty, when he rises to shake the earth.

²²Stop trusting in man, who has but a breath in his nostrils. Of what account is he?

3:1See now, the Lord, the LORD Almighty, is about to take from Jerusalem and Judah both supply and support: all supplies of food and all supplies of water,

²the hero and warrior, the judge and prophet, the soothsayer and elder,

³the captain of fifty and man of rank, the counselor, skilled craftsman and clever enchanter.

⁴I will make boys their officials; mere children will govern them.

⁵People will oppress each other man against man, neighbor against neighbor.

The young will rise up against the old, the base against the honorable.

⁶A man will seize one of his brothers at his father's home, and say,

"You have a cloak, you be our leader; take charge of this heap of ruins!"

⁷But in that day he will cry out, "I have no remedy.

I have no food or clothing in my house; do not make me the leader of the people."

⁸Jerusalem staggers, Judah is falling;

their words and deeds are against the LORD,

defying his glorious presence.

⁹The look on their faces testifies against them;

they parade their sin like Sodom; they do not hide it.

Woe to them!

They have brought disaster upon themselves.

¹⁰Tell the righteous it will be well with them, for they will enjoy the fruit of their deeds.

¹¹Woe to the wicked! Disaster is upon them!

They will be paid back for what their hands have done.

¹²Youths oppress my people, women rule over them.

O my people, your guides lead you astray; they turn you from the path.

13The LORD takes his place in court; he rises to judge the people.

¹⁴The LORD enters into judgment against the elders and leaders of his people:

"It is you who have ruined my vineyard; the plunder from the poor is in your houses.

15What do you mean by crushing my people and grinding the faces of the poor?" declares the Lord, the LORD Almighty.

¹⁶The LORD says, "The women of Zion are haughty, walking along with outstretched necks, flirting with their eyes, tripping along with mincing steps, with ornaments jingling on their ankles. ¹⁷Therefore the Lord will bring sores on the heads of the women of Zion; the LORD will make their scalps bald."

¹⁸In that day the Lord will snatch away their finery: the bangles and headbands and crescent necklaces, ¹⁹the earrings and bracelets and veils, ²⁰the headdresses and ankle chains and sashes, the perfume bottles and charms, ²¹the signet rings and nose rings, ²²the fine robes and the capes and cloaks, the purses ²³and mirrors, and the linen garments and tiaras and shawls.

²⁴Instead of fragrance there will be a stench: instead of a sash, a rope; instead of well-dressed hair, baldness; instead of fine clothing, sackcloth; instead of beauty, branding. ²⁵Your men will fall by the sword. your warriors in battle. ²⁶The gates of Zion will lament and mourn; destitute, she will sit on the ground. 4:1In that day seven women will take hold of one man and say, "We will eat our own food and provide our own clothes; only let us be called by your name. Take away our disgrace!"

Original Meaning

EVEN MORE ABRUPTLY than 2:1-5 after Isaiah 1, these verses are a radical shift from the hopeful note of 2:1-5. As noted at the end of chapter 1, Isaiah is clearly concerned that no one fails to deal with present sins because of a

false security in the certainty of future hope. Whatever good the future may hold, the present is dark indeed. At the center of that ominous present is human arrogance—and that is the theme that unites 2:6–4:1.

But the theme is not merely arrogance; it is the humiliation that arrogance necessarily brings upon itself. Because Israel and Judah have been seduced by human power and glory and have consequently abandoned the Creator in whom the only true glory exists, they are doomed to be terribly humiliated. The theme is addressed in three sections. In the first (2:6–22) is a general statement of the principle. The second (3:1–15) is a specific illustration of the principle, while the third (3:16–4:1) is an even more specific illustration.

General Statement of the Principle (2:6–22)

THIS SECTION IS marked by the repetition of a refrain in verses 11 and 17. While there is a slight variation in wording between the two,² the import of both is the same: Human "height" is an impossibility in view of the sole glory of God. He alone is "high and exalted" (6:1), and any attempt on our part to claim some of that glory for ourselves is doomed to fail. The chapter ends with a grim conclusion: Why would anyone put ultimate trust in humanity when every human being is only one breath away from extinction?

Verses 6–10 begin with a sharp contrast to 2:5. There the "house of Jacob" was called to walk in the ways of the Lord, since the day is coming when all the nations of earth will be seeking those ways. But here Isaiah says God has abandoned the "house of Jacob" because instead of being filled with the ways of the true God, they are full of human wisdom (v. 6), human wealth and power (v. 7), and human-made idols (v. 8).⁴ None of these can stand up for a moment against the true splendor of the universe that exists in God alone, so the result is that those who trust in such things must be humiliated (vv. 9–11).

The first colon of verse 6 does not actually specify what it is from "the East" that fills the house of Jacob, but the appearance of those who practice "divination" in the second colon suggests the idea of "superstitions." The East was understood as the origin of wisdom and learning ("east" and "antiquity" are derived from the same root: *qdm*). Undoubtedly the complex

religious thought of Mesopotamia had a terrific appeal over against the simple and austere religion of Yahweh.

Not only have the Israelites filled themselves with the world's learning; they have filled themselves with the world's values: wealth and power. In Isaiah's time "horses" and "chariots" represented the most powerful weapons of war available. For a king to have a large chariot force was a sign of his wealth and power. This is why God forbade their multiplication in Deuteronomy 17:16 and why Solomon's disobedience (1 Kings 10:28) was so serious.

Placing a premium on human wisdom and human values issues in human self-worship, and the outcome is idolatry—conceiving of the divine in human terms. Again and again throughout the book, Isaiah mocks the practice of idolatry as the use of human hands to make gods and questions how something made by us can possibly take care of us (Isa. 17:8; 30:22; 40:18–20; 44:9–10; 46:5–7). Putting our trust in the creation instead of the Creator and trying to elevate ourselves to the place of God can only result in humiliation when the true God is revealed.

The cryptic injunction "Do not forgive them" at the end of verse 9 can be understood in different ways. It may be the prophet's cry to God not to be too gracious to these people who have filled themselves with all the wrong things. But it may also be his injunction to other humans not to let fellow humans too easily out of the consequences of their self-exaltation.⁵

Verses 12–18 amplify this theme of the Lord's sole glory by contrasting him with every "high" thing in creation. That includes trees (v. 13), mountains (v. 14), fortifications (v. 15), and beautiful, tall-masted ships (v. 16). Nothing in all creation can compare to the Lord. He is another order of being altogether. So how can mere humans and the gods they have created hope to stand up to him (vv. 17–18)?

All this is brought to a blistering conclusion in verses 19–22. The prophet declares that those things that human hands created and human minds pronounced holy will be hastily cast away when he who is truly holy is revealed. They will not merely be cast away but will be cast away to "the rodents and bats," the most unclean of animals. Those who tried to make themselves as tall as the trees or as high as the mountains will be cowering under the rocks, seeking the lowest holes in which to hide from the One who is truly lofty (see Luke 23:30). The study of opposites in the section is

thus brought to its climax. Our attempt to make humanity holy actually ends up making us unclean, and our attempt to give ourselves significance renders us worthless. Why would the Israelites put their trust in something worthless and unclean when they can put their trust in the living God?

Illustration of Human Arrogance (3:1–15)

THIS SECTION ILLUSTRATES the theme of arrogance producing humiliation by looking at the leadership of Judah. While it is possible that several originally independent pieces have been put together here (vv. 1–4, 5–7, 8–15), the use of the same terms for God in the opening and closing verses ("the Lord, the LORD Almighty") and the continued attention to leadership argue that the collection is not an accidental one. It begins with the assertion that the things Judah has trusted in apart from God will be removed. Not only will this include the obvious things such as food and water (v. 1), but even more significantly (on the basis of the amount of space given), all the great leaders from "warriors" (v. 2) to "enchanters" (v. 3) on whom Judah has depended. They have trusted in mere breath-filled humans (2:22), and now they will be deprived of such leadership. This is not merely because to place such trust in them was wrong in the first place, but also because the leaders have failed in their responsibilities (3:13–15).

The Judeans have idolized the great men, somehow believing that such people will deliver them from their difficulties. But God is going to deprive the people of their false security (3:1–3). Instead of great men, mere "boys" will be their leaders (3:4), people lacking either the maturity or the moral authority to administer the nation in a just way. The result will be anarchy, with violence undermining the last vestiges of order (3:5).

It is probable that Isaiah has in mind here typical conditions following the defeat of a nation and the exile of its leaders and craftsmen. They are certainly similar to the conditions described in Jeremiah 40–42. The connection with exile is further reinforced by the vignette in Isaiah 3:6–7. Since no one with natural leadership skills is left to govern "this heap of ruins," even the possession of a cloak (as a badge of office?) will be considered all that is necessary to assume a leadership position—but such a person will not take the job. This is how far, the prophet says, we are going to go in humiliation after having exalted our great men so high.

The connection of the forgoing with 2:6–22 is underscored by 3:8–9. Judah's sin is arrogance. They have defied "the eyes of his glory" (lit.; NIV "his glorious presence"), which reminds us immediately of the "eyes of the arrogant" in 2:11. God's eyes are the only ones that can be legitimately lifted up over the world, and to defy him by lifting up our eyes is foolish. Ultimately, it is to commit the sin of "Sodom" and Gomorrah, which was not first of all sexual sin but the insistence of the residents that they had the right to determine right and wrong for themselves. The only result of such pride is "disaster."

Verses 10–11 underline the cause-and-effect nature of relations with God. He is not arbitrary in his judgments. If "woe" comes upon the wicked, the righteous need to know that "it will be well with them." As in the physical world, so it is in the spiritual world. We have been made to operate within certain parameters. If we do so, we may expect positive results. If we choose to live outside those parameters, we should not be surprised if negative results follow.

Verses 12–15 detail God's judgment on the leaders whom Judah has idolized. Why will they be removed? Why will they be taken into captivity? Why will their nation be humiliated? The simple answer is that they are not great men at all. They may appear so, and the people may praise them as if they are, but their behavior makes it plain that they are not qualified to lead. They are "youths" and "women," two categories of persons who in that society had neither the training nor the status to give leadership. These elders of the people oppress the poor, "grinding" their "faces" in the dirt. Instead of denying themselves to tend the Lord's "vineyard," the nation of Judah, they have "ruined" it with their greed for gain and their lust for power.

Another Illustration of Human Arrogance (3:16–4:1)

THIS THIRD SECTION on human arrogance is the most graphic of all. Most commentators believe it is addressed to the wealthy women of Judah and Jerusalem.⁶ And it may have been, originally. However, in the context in which it now occurs, I believe it is being used to symbolize the nation as a whole.⁷ This conclusion is reinforced both by the use of "women [lit., daughters] of Zion" in 4:4 and by the way in which Zion is personified in 3:25–26. The nation is compared to a beautiful and haughty woman, whose

whole attention is given to appearance and image. Zion has sought to exalt herself with every kind of accouterment and ornament. She glances at potential lovers from behind her veils and fans.

Once again, the prophet presents the contrast in the strongest terms. The arrogant heads will be bowed in shame, the beautiful hair shaved off to reveal sores seeping pus (3:17). All the beautiful clothing will be stripped off and replaced with a strip of burlap and a piece of rope (3:24). The city will be reduced to utter destitution.

In 4:1 the prophet gives the final graphic illustration of humiliation. In that society it was a great shame for a woman to have no family connections. Yet Isaiah foresees a day when so many of the men have died in plague or been killed in war that there are not enough fathers and husbands to go around. In utter humiliation, seven women will beg one man to give them his name with no obligation on his part at all. Here is the final degradation of human pride.

Bridging Contexts

THE BASIC MEANING of this passage needs little translation to make it applicable to the modern setting. The central issue is the human instinct to exalt ourselves in a number of ways, whether it be wealth, education, political power, military power, beauty, religion, or whatever. We do this because of our fundamental insecurity. When we face reality, we know we are but a breath, here one moment and gone the next (2:22). But beyond our transitoriness, there is a more serious problem—our sin. We may not choose to call it that. We may prefer "mistakes," "shortcomings," "failures," or some other softer term. But the fact is that there is an almost universal awareness among humans of having fallen short of our potential.

It is interesting that there are no public school programs designed to lower students' falsely high self-esteem. No, the sense of failure and worthlessness seems ingrained in all of us. This is, of course, to be expected if the account in Genesis 3 is true. We are alienated from the true source of permanence and meaning in our lives and are thus doomed to replicate the tragedies of those first generations. But instead of seeking to come penitently to our Creator and seek the forgiveness (Isa. 2:9) of the Judge of the universe, human beings seek to build themselves up in all the ways

described here. The problem with all of these attempts is that they cannot achieve what they promise. Every attempt to make ourselves significant on our own is rendered helpless by the fundamental fact of our mortality.

Contemporary idolatry. We may be inclined to think that the diatribe against idolatry here has little relevance to those of us in the West at present. However, we must remember that idolatry is a state of mind before it is a religious practice—that state of mind that believes it can guarantee security through the manipulation of this world. This idea rests on two false premises: that the guarantee of my security is the most important aim in life, and that that security can be maintained through the powers of this world.

Both of those are false because they make creation primary. They exalt creation to the place reserved for the Creator alone. The most important aim is to be rightly related to the Creator, who alone can hold us securely. For most of the last two centuries we in the West have believed these premises but have insisted that there is no spiritual component to creation. We have believed that the powers we had to manipulate in order to guarantee our security were inanimate and material. But that has not made us any the less idolaters than our pagan predecessors. We have exalted creation to the heights and have placed ourselves and our capacity for reason at the very center of it. We have said that we are ultimate and that there is nothing more important than us and the achieving of our goals.

Now, however, having conquered the powers of nature to a degree unimaginable even a hundred years ago, we are discovering that we have still not made ourselves secure in the ways we expected to. We are discovering that there is something more to reality than just the physical and material. But we do not wish to bow down to that spiritual reality. So, in order to give ourselves the feeling of being able to control it, we are imagining it on our own terms. This is nothing more than the people of the ancient Near East did five thousand years ago. To try to imagine the universe with ourselves at the center of it is to become idolaters.

Idolization of human leaders. Just as idolatry is one logical effect of the attempt to make the achievement of human needs primary in the world, so is the idolization of human leaders. One aspect of this is what is known as projection. Wanting to be great ourselves, we admire those who have achieved what we think of as ultimate. But another aspect grows out of the

realization that we cannot achieve our goals of wealth, pleasure, comfort, and power by ourselves. There must be some political order and stability if those goals are to be achieved. Therefore, we exalt the strong leader who seems able to guarantee those conditions. But what we are doing in those cases is giving a human the position of God. The end is predictable: The human who is given power and adulation wants more of those; there can never be enough.

The next step is oppression as the leader makes himself and his desires the end of everything. The final step, then, is the need of the people to destroy the leader. Again, there are two aspects to this: Not only is there the desire to be free of the oppression, but there is also the awareness that the one whom we expected to be God for us has failed us. We have placed him in an impossible position: He can never possibly provide for us the things we demand of him, so he must be destroyed.

Contemporary Significance

ULTIMATE REALITY. Some would claim that the roots of our present intellectual disaster extend all the way back to Aquinas with his separation of reality into nature and grace, or nature and supernature. This had the effect of separating God from the material and physical world and of removing him from normal history. From that time on, God has been moved more and more to the periphery of things. In the eighteenth century, human reason was lifted to the level of court of last resort. If something was not rational, it did not exist. Immanuel Kant sought to make a place for God by arguing that real value is beyond reason, but he only succeeded in separating fact and meaning in such a way as to make meaning almost wholly subjective. This ultimately led Friedrich Nietzsche to declare that the whole concept of God is not only useless but pernicious, because it tends to confuse and dilute the real meaning of life, which is the will to power.

All of this movement of European thought led in one direction, that of making humans and their desires and goals ultimate reality. If there is a God at all, he is removed from everything necessary to the functioning of ordinary human life. But the end of this type of thinking had already been discovered in the ancient Near Eastern religions. If there is no reality

outside of the cosmos, then all reality may be defined in terms of our experience. That means reality is to be understood by analogy with this world. The gods are humans, only larger in every way. They are better than we, but worse than we. They are more generous than we, but more petty than we. They are more disciplined than we, but more debauched than we. Humanity is the measure of reality. And what was the result of that thinking in the ancient pagan religions? Humans themselves became worthless. The human race was an afterthought, without real significance or value, and individual humans were less than nothing.

This same thing has happened in Western thought. If all of reality is defined in terms of humanity, if we are the highest order of being, then reality is meaningless because we have no meaning in ourselves. This is nowhere clearer than in the movement of existentialism that emerged after World War I and has finally taken root in popular consciousness. Prior to that global catastrophe, it was possible to argue that inanimate nature was necessarily progressing to higher and higher forms, of which humanity was the highest yet to appear. That was a key idea in the thinking of Marx and Engels, who argued that if the means of production were forcibly redistributed among the masses, true equality among humans would necessarily emerge.

But after Ypres and the Somme, the idea of inevitable human progress became laughable. When science and human reason had been used to devour a whole generation of European youth, the idea of the inevitable upward progress of the human race could only be maintained under the harshest of human tyrannies, as in Russia. In freer Western Europe, the logical consequences of the Great War have been inescapable: There is no meaning in existence; humanity is all there is and humanity is nothing. But the terrible irony of life is that we humans must have something beyond ourselves to live for! So, the existentialist philosophers argued that we must each create our own pattern of meaning, all the time knowing that there is no meaning. This, of course, means that no one can claim that his or her system of meaning is *the* meaning of life; there is no such thing. Thus today, although the person on the street cannot explain the philosophical basis for his or her ideas, it is still obvious that existentialism has come to rule the day.

True humility. This is exactly what Isaiah is talking about here. We as humans have sought to arrogate for ourselves the place of God in the universe. We have said that the fulfillment of our personal needs is ultimate, and we have understood with Nietzsche that the only way to do that is to gain power for ourselves. But that way is disaster. If we are the greatest beings in the universe, then there is no meaning in the universe and Death is the lord of all. Whatever we may achieve, he stands at the end of the road, laughing at all our pretensions. Why should we pay any attention to humans? Of what worth is a blob of protoplasm? In our attempt to exalt ourselves, we have in fact reduced ourselves to nothing. The apostle Paul also saw this clearly, as he testifies in Romans 1:21–32: Refusing to submit thankfully to God, we are reduced to worshiping our appetites and representing the divine with the basest forms of earth.

What should we have done? Although it is not explicitly stated here, it is still appropriate to mention it in this context. We should have done the very opposite. We should have admitted that our needs are not primary but that a relationship with our Creator is. We should have submitted our needs to him, recognizing that he is Lord of all. We should have recognized that he has entered into our time and space, ultimately in Jesus Christ, and has thus given that time and space eternal meaning. Even more, we should acknowledge that by taking on our form, God has given humanity ultimate worth.

Thus, if instead of trying to make ourselves God in order to take care of ourselves, we submit to God and allow him to care for us, we will find ourselves lifted to the place of sons and daughters of God. Trying to take his place, we become nothing, but allowing him to be exalted alone, we become the princes and princesses of the universe. This is what Peter means when he says, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (1 Peter 5:6).

It is important to think about the real meaning of humility in this context. Too often we think of humility as "feeling bad about yourself," or at least pretending to! Thus, we have the common phrase "false humility." But in fact, that is not what humility is at all, as this passage in Isaiah makes clear. The opposite of self-exaltation is not self-denigration. Too often that is simply an attempt to garner sympathy for oneself, an attempt to get others to say good things about us. No, true humility is to refuse to put oneself in

the place of God. It is to know oneself as a child of God, to know one's place in God's economy, and to know one's worth in his sight. Knowing these, it is possible not to need to call attention to oneself.

That is true humility: self-forgetfulness. It is the ability to go about the tasks God has given, secure in his love and his valuing, without wondering if others appreciate us as much as they should. It is the ability to see others being praised and not need to belittle them, either silently or aloud, in an effort to make oneself look good by comparison. To paraphrase a popular saying: "Humility is to know there is a God, and to know you are not him!"

Proper approach to leadership. A third concern this passage addresses is the proper approach to leadership. As mentioned above, the human tendency is first of all to idolize human leaders. It is to place them on a pedestal, giving them all the attributes we want them to have for our sakes. We see in them what we would like to have and be, and we expect them to give us what God alone can give: meaning, worth, and security.

This is a sure recipe for failure. We are placing our leaders in impossible positions when we treat them in this way. We are asking them to be God for us, and this is something they can never be. What happens then is predictable. When leaders fail, as fail they must, we turn on them and demand their heads. Having expected them to be God for us, we are unable to let them be anything less than the perfect leader. The often merciless criticism that follows is another part of the pattern: We exalt ourselves by belittling the "great" ones.

Under such oscillating adulation and criticism our leaders typically crack. The break often manifests itself in one of two ways, both closely related. The one way is the way of oppression. Believing the adulation they have received and writhing under the criticism, they take the way of power. They assert a right to dictate to the followers the way they should go, and as leaders, they take the right to make use of the followers to serve their own ends. If people don't like it, that's too bad! "After all, I have given them so much!"

The other break is a moral break. Here the erosion is more subtle. The leader is conscientious in trying to meet the needs of the followers, but he or she increasingly feels the impossibility of what is being demanded. The strain mounts, and when it is coupled with an unreal level of adulation, the

stage is set for collapse. It may have to do with sexuality, or money, or substance abuse, but the break comes.

What is the biblical way of leadership, particularly as displayed here? As is obvious, it is a two-way street, involving both the followers and the leader. (1) The people must surrender themselves and their needs to God. They must stop looking to any human, themselves or another, for what only God can provide. (2) They must allow their leaders to be fallible. I do not mean morally fallible, but in their performance as leaders. The people have a right to expect their leaders to be exemplary, both as persons and as believers, but they do not have a right to ask their leaders to fill the place of God in the lives of their followers. (3) They must not give to any human the adulation that is due to God alone. Leaders must be respected, if only for the position they hold, but they must not be worshiped. (4) They must be aware that a spirit of constant criticism of a leader is a sure sign of an unsurrendered spirit in the critic. The attempt to belittle another is a certain indicator of an inner need to exalt oneself.

As for leaders, it is clear that they should never believe the adulation that people give them. Here, it is not so important how one responds to such fulsome praise on the outside as it is on the inside. Once again, the condition of one's own soul is critical. If you know your own fallibility and how desperately you need God, and if you have genuinely surrendered your destiny to God, you can offer up all the praise to God at the end of the day with a smile.

At the same time, these conditions will not allow the criticism to destroy you. You know you are not in this to please yourself but God. Thus, even though cruel comments hurt, you can look at what is said with a somewhat objective eye, not rejecting them outright but neither taking them too deeply to heart. In it all, you know, as Moses did in Exodus 32:11 or Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:5–9, that these are not your people but God's. Like the good shepherd, you do not have the right to use the flock for your purposes but are expected to lay down your life for God's purposes in them (John 10:10–11). In the end, the question for the leader is the same as it is for those being led: Who supplies my needs? If we have genuinely surrendered our needs to God, we will be armored against the temptations to satisfy the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life for ourselves (1 John 2:16).

Isaiah 4:2-6

In that day the Branch of the LORD will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land will be the pride and glory of the survivors in Israel. ³Those who are left in Zion, who remain in Jerusalem, will be called holy, all who are recorded among the living in Jerusalem. ⁴The Lord will wash away the filth of the women of Zion; he will cleanse the bloodstains from Jerusalem by a spirit of judgment and a spirit of fire. ⁵Then the LORD will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over all the glory will be a canopy. ⁶It will be a shelter and shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and hiding place from the storm and rain.

Original Meaning

As was the case in moving from Isaiah 1 to 2:1–5, so here there is no transition between the negative words of 2:6–4:1 and these much more positive words. In fact, the contrast between these two sections is heightened by the fact that both 4:1 and 4:2 begin with "in that day," a reference to the future. In 4:1 the future is grim, as Jerusalem is humiliated. But in 4:2 the future is bright, as God promises abundance in place of desolation and cleansing in place of blood and filth. God does not intend to leave his people in the consequences of their sins.

Commentators are divided as to the intent of the phrase "the Branch of the LORD" (4:2). Some take it to refer to the Messiah, as in Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15 and Zechariah 3:8; 6:12.¹ Others argue that the immediate context of Isaiah 4:2 suggests that it is the land itself that is being talked about.² However, the overall context of 4:2–6 seems to argue against a too-literal understanding. There is a clear eschatological tone that calls for an understanding of the phrase in that light.³ The kind of cleansing and

purification being described here can only take place in the context of the fulfillment of the messianic promises.

The promises here are not in place of judgment but through it. The "survivors" (4:2) are the remnant left after the "fire" of judgment (4:4) has done its work. There are three results of that raging firestorm (NIV, "spirit [or wind] of fire"). (1) The people will be "holy" (4:3); that is, they will belong to God alone and will reflect the character of their owner (see Ex. 19:6; Lev. 22:32). (2) They will be cleansed of their "filth" and "bloodstains," that is, the accumulated guilt of all their sins (Isa. 4:4). (3) They will experience the presence of God not as a threat but as a blessing (4:5). By his presence ("the glory"), he will provide the very security for which they had turned to idols. The imagery of the "cloud by day" and "fire by night" is reminiscent of that used in Exodus (Ex. 40:38). In short, Isaiah sees the messianic kingdom as a return to what the Exodus was meant to produce.⁴

Bridging Contexts

What are we to make of the abrupt shift after Isa. 2:22–4:1? At the least, it is underlining again the fact that God does not intend judgment to be his last word. If it is true that there are certain inevitable consequences that follow sinful choices, it is also true that God can take us through those consequences and bring us out on the other side without the consequences having annihilated us. Judgment is not intended to destroy but to cleanse. The only issue is whether we will be among those who allow the judgment to do its cleansing work.

This passage also speaks of the unchanging nature of God's plans for his people. From the Exodus onward, it is plain that God's ultimate goal is to live among his people and, in fact, not merely among them but in them. He means to provide the security, the comfort, the well-being that we so desperately crave. This is why the climax of the book of Exodus is not the crossing of the Red Sea or the sealing of the covenant, but rather the moment of God's glory filling the tabernacle (Ex. 40:38).

However, if God is to dwell among us—indeed, in us—two things must happen. (1) There must be a means of cleansing us from the accumulated guilt of the past. God cannot live in a filthy temple. That is what Leviticus

1–9 is about. (2) God's character must somehow be replicated in us. As Amos says it, two cannot walk together unless they be agreed (Amos 3:3). That's what Leviticus 10–27 is about.

Contemporary Significance

In this day when Christianity is often preached as a get-rich-quick scheme, we need to hear Isaiah's words with clarity. Too easily when difficulties come upon us, we think that God has abandoned us or that the devil is oppressing us. In many of these cases, the adversity is the judgment of God. We have sinned in our lust for comfort, pleasure, and security, and we are now experiencing those results. But it is not a cruel God who brings those things upon us, and it is not a rejecting God who abandons us to the fire. Rather, it is a loving God who sees no other way to bring us to the place where he can live in us.

The fact is, God is not too concerned whether we are happy or not. But he is very concerned over whether we are holy. We can be happy and on our way to hell. But if we are holy, it is only because the Holy One is at home in his temple, our hearts. So we ought to take a long look at adversity and ask what Jesus the Branch means to burn out of us so that he can take us into his tabernacle, where he abides with the Father.

We should also recognize that comfort, pleasure, and security are all by-products, not ends in themselves. If we make those things primary, we *will* become idolaters, and we will lose those things even as we seize them. But if we make God's presence and his character primary, then comfort, pleasure, and security will fall on us all unawares. But they will be when and where God chooses, and that will be enough because we know he is all we need and that all those other things may come and go as they will. We can live that way because we know that he has no desire to deprive us but seeks, even in the fire, to do us good.

Isaiah 5:1-30

²I WILL SING for the one I love
a song about his vineyard:
My loved one had a vineyard
on a fertile hillside.
²He dug it up and cleared it of stones
and planted it with the choicest vines.
He built a watchtower in it
and cut out a winepress as well.
Then he looked for a crop of good grapes,
but it yielded only bad fruit.

³"Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. ⁴What more could have been done for my vinevard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? ⁵Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. ⁶I will make it a wasteland. neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it."

⁷The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah

are the garden of his delight.

And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;
for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

⁸Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land.

⁹The LORD Almighty has declared in my hearing:

"Surely the great houses will become desolate, the fine mansions left without occupants.

¹⁰A ten-acre vineyard will produce only a bath of wine, a homer of seed only an ephah of grain."

11 Woe to those who rise early in the morning to run after their drinks, who stay up late at night till they are inflamed with wine.
12 They have harps and lyres at their banquets, tambourines and flutes and wine, but they have no regard for the deeds of the LORD, no respect for the work of his hands.
13 Therefore my people will go into exile for lack of understanding;

their men of rank will die of hunger

and their masses will be parched with thirst.

¹⁴Therefore the grave enlarges its appetite and opens its mouth without limit; into it will descend their nobles and masses with all their brawlers and revelers.

15So man will be brought low and mankind humbled, the eyes of the arrogant humbled.

16But the LORD Almighty will be exalted by his justice, and the holy God will show himself holy by his righteousness.

¹⁷Then sheep will graze as in their own pasture; lambs will feed among the ruins of the rich.

¹⁸Woe to those who draw sin along with cords of deceit, and wickedness as with cart ropes, ¹⁹to those who say, "Let God hurry,

Ito those who say, "Let God hurry, let him hasten his work so we may see it.

Let it approach,

let the plan of the Holy One of Israel come,

so we may know it."

²⁰Woe to those who call evil good and good evil,

who put darkness for light and light for darkness,

who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.

²¹Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight.

²²Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine

and champions at mixing drinks,

²³who acquit the guilty for a bribe, but deny justice to the innocent.

²⁴Therefore, as tongues of fire lick up straw and as dry grass sinks down in the flames,

and their flowers blow away like dust; for they have rejected the law of the LORD Almighty and spurned the word of the Holy One of Israel.

²⁵Therefore the LORD's anger burns against his people; his hand is raised and he strikes them down.

The mountains shake, and the dead bodies are like refuse in the streets.

Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised.

²⁶He lifts up a banner for the distant nations,he whistles for those at the ends of the earth.

Here they come, swiftly and speedily!

Not one of them grows tired or stumbles, not one slumbers or sleeps;
not a belt is loosened at the waist, not a sandal thong is broken.
Their arrows are sharp,

all their bows are strung;
their horses' hoofs seem like flint,
their chariot wheels like a whirlwind.

²⁹Their roar is like that of the lion,
they roar like young lions;
they growl as they seize their prey
and carry it off with no one to rescue.

³⁰In that day they will roar over it
like the roaring of the sea.
And if one looks at the land,
he will see darkness and distress;
even the light will be darkened by the
clouds.

Original Meaning

IN CHAPTER 5 Isaiah brings his introduction to a close. Once again, without transition, the tone shifts from hope to judgment. Once again, as real as the future hope may be, the prophet wants his readers to know that apart from a radical change of behavior, the only way for that hope to be realized is through the fire. The chapter divides fairly clearly into three sections. (1) The first is another graphic illustration, that of a vineyard that despite the farmer's careful work produces only bitter grapes (5:1–6). (2) Next is the explanation of the illustration, in which the prophet declares that Israel is the vineyard, God the farmer, and the bitter grapes Israel's sinful behavior (5:7–24). (3) The conclusion (5:25–30) states that the enemy nations are being called in to destroy Israel, just as the wild animals were called in to destroy the useless vineyard.

The Vineyard (5:1–6)

THROUGHOUT THE BOOK Isaiah makes use of illustrations to bring his point home. We have already seen a number of brief examples, such as the wounded body and abandoned lean-to of chapter 1. We have also seen a longer example in 3:16–4:1, where Jerusalem is compared to a beautiful and haughty woman. Here, in one sense, the author sums up everything he has said thus far in one powerful image. This image of the vineyard would

have special poignancy for the Judean audience that Isaiah is addressing, because grapes is the crop that grows best in Judah.

But, as the illustration makes plain, a grape crop demands a great deal of preparation and care. The land must first be cleared of other plants and then of the rocks that the Judean hillsides produce in abundance (v. 2). This is the work of an entire year. Then the finest vines that one can afford must be purchased and carefully set out. During that second year the cleared rocks must be built into fences and watchtowers in order to keep out marauders, both four-footed and two-footed. Finally, in the third year, the fruit of all the previous labor is ready.

It is easy to imagine the Judean farmers being right with the speaker as they anticipate the sweet harvest. And it is also possible to imagine their outrage when they are told that for all that effort, the outcome is only bitter grapes (v. 2). So when Isaiah announces that he is going to tear down the wall and let the wild animals in and even pray the heavens to stop raining on that vineyard (vv. 5–6), we can imagine the hearers shouting, "Yes, do it!"

Explanation of the Vineyard (5:7–24)

BUT LIKE THE religious leaders to whom Jesus told the story of the wicked tenants (Luke 20:9–19), the hearers suddenly realize Isaiah is talking about them: "The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel." In the succeeding verses Isaiah tells his hearers what those bitter grapes are. He begins with a general statement in Isa. 5:7 and then gives the specifics in a series of "woes" in verses 8–24. Verse 7 contains two wordplays in Hebrew that are not apparent in English. The word for "bloodshed" (mišpaḥ) sounds like the word for "justice" (mišpaṭ), and the word for "cries" (ṣeʿaqah) sounds like the word for "righteousness" (ṣeʿaqah). Thus the poet underlines the contrast between what was expected and what was actually received.

Five specific behaviors are condemned in verses 8–24, each introduced with the word "woe." This is a word associated with funerals. A slightly more contemporary, though still archaic equivalent, would be "alas." "Woe" is a word that speaks of sorrow, regret, and anger. A death lies ahead, all the more tragic because it is so unnecessary. The woes describe the sins of the people in relation to the kinds of lives God had called for them to live in the Sinai covenant. These sins include greed (vv. 8–10), self-indulgence (vv.

11–17), cynicism (vv. 18–19), moral perversion (v. 20; also v. 21), and social injustice (vv. 22–24).

Although there is an overall conclusion to the chapter in verses 25–30 (where the consequences of these actions are spelled out), several of the woe passages also include a statement of consequences. The most prominent of these is found in verses 13–17, but they also appear in verses 9–10 and 24. Clearly the people feel as if they can live in all these ways and still escape the consequences because of their relation to God. But Isaiah is saying that is foolish. There are consequences in life. Just as the vineyard of bitter grapes will be destroyed because of what it produced, so will Israel.

Greed. The particular expression of greed addressed in verse 8 is greed for bigger houses and more land. The rich man buys more and more land, dispossessing the former owners one by one until at last he lives alone on a vast estate, with the former owners as his serfs. This kind of sin was particularly offensive to God because in the covenant God retained ownership of the land, giving it in the form of grants to his servants. These grants were not absolute possessions to be disposed of at will, but they were to be maintained in the respective families for all time. This not only reinforced the idea of dependence on God, but it also guaranteed both a sense of worth and a means of subsistence for the small landowner.

In verses 9 and 10 God announces a punishment that fits the crime. Just as the rich man has dispossessed others, he will be dispossessed, and all the land he has acquired will produce almost nothing. Undoubtedly, the Exile is in view here, as it is throughout the chapter.

Self-indulgence. The "bitter grape" given most attention is the one of self-indulgence (vv. 11–17), and much of the passage is the announcement of judgment on this behavior. The real issue here is one of attention. Clearly, the God of the Scriptures is not opposed to physical pleasure. Isaiah himself depicts the final scene of history as a vast banquet that God has prepared for all peoples on earth (25:6). This idea is continued in the New Testament with the wedding feast of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7–9). So this is not an attack on all physical enjoyment. Rather, it is attacking the paying of attention to these things as if they are the only things that matter. Instead of paying primary attention to God and his "work" (Isa. 5:12), they are giving that attention to things that are all passing away.

Once again, the punishment fits the crime. As these wealthy and noble people have focused on what goes down their throats, the day will come when nothing goes down (v. 13). And just as they have opened their mouths wider and wider to take in more, so death will open its mouth yet wider still and suck them all down.² It is clear that the wealthy and mighty are especially in view because verses 15–16, using language directly reminiscent of 2:6–22, speak of the humiliation of the arrogant, while the greatness and holiness of God is manifested in his justice and righteousness. Isa. 5:17 depicts the sheep that once provided the expansive meals for "the rich," now feeding quietly among the "ruins" of the banqueting halls of the rich.

Cynicism. From the more "fleshly" sins of greed and indulgence, the prophet proceeds to the underlying attitudes that both precede and follow the sins of the flesh. The first of these attitudes is cynicism that dares God to take action (vv. 18–19). The precise meaning of the phrase "cords of deceit" is not clear, but the general intent is. These are people who delight in sinning, who seek out ways to do it more aggressively, all the while insisting that if such a course of action was so bad, the great God, this "Holy One of Israel" Isaiah keeps going on about, will certainly take some action against it. In the meantime, they intend to keep right on pleasing themselves at all costs.

Moral perversion. The fourth woe (vv. 20–21) takes the situation one step further. Now it is not merely daring God to condemn sin. Rather, it is declaring that there is no such thing as sin, that in fact what was previously declared to be wrong is actually right and that what has been considered right is actually wrong. Such persons have dismissed God from the picture entirely. They are so wise that they can make up their own morality. Oddly enough, this new morality takes the shape of direct opposition to what had been God's standards. It is not a matter of simply picking and choosing, but a specific contraversion of what had been declared right and wrong. This suggests that what is going on is not merely asserting one's right to choose one's own moral conventions, but is rather a revolt against any moral authority at all.

Social injustice. The final woe (vv. 22–24) comes back to matters of practice and, in so doing, links all of the sins together. The prophet speaks ironically of those who are great at what does not matter (mixing drinks)

and therefore neglect what does matter—justice. The nobility of Judah, instead of standing up for truly noble causes, have turned to ignoble pursuits. They give prizes not to those who defend the helpless but to those who can drink the most liquor before going under the table. They are small in the great things and great in the small things.

This is not accidental. If the goal of one's life is to take care of oneself, then serving one's own appetites and perverting justice in order to do so are as logical as any mathematics. What has happened? The people have rejected the instruction (NIV "law," Heb. *torah*) of the One being who stands outside of time and space, the One being in the universe who has the right to be called "Holy," the One who has yet condescended to give himself in covenant to Israel (v. 24b). That is, the people have rejected the instruction of the One being in the universe who is in a position to give such instructions. The only permanence humans have is in relation to the transcendent Creator, so it should not be surprising to them if, having rejected him, they are swept away like dry grass in a brush fire (v. 24a).

The Calling of the Enemy Nations (5:25–30)

In these closing verses of chapter 5, the intimations of exile in the preceding verses are brought together and made explicit. The vineyard has produced the bitter grapes of greed, self-indulgence, cynicism, moral perversion, and social injustice, and there is nothing left but to tear down the walls and call the animals in to trample the useless vines and strip off their leaves. Isaiah makes it clear that the coming destruction is not merely because the Mesopotamian powers of Assyria and Babylon are so great. In one way their greatness and power has nothing to do with it. No, it is not these military and political powers to which Israel must come to terms. It is God's moral character.

To underline this point, Isaiah uses a refrain he will repeat again several times in 9:8–10:4: "For all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised" (5:25b). Why are these great powers coming? Merely as an expression of their own imperial ambitions? No, they are instruments in the hands of God, being used to enforce the logical consequences of a continued pattern of covenant-breaking. They come in response to his signal "banner"; they respond to his "whistle" like obedient dogs (5:26).

In 5:27–29 Isaiah uses short, terse couplets to create a sense of urgency and impulsion. The great army comes on with unstoppable speed. Everything is in readiness, every weapon ready to be used against these people who have become God's enemies (1:24). They had claimed for themselves the right to say what was light and what was darkness. Now they will be treated to the folly of such claims, when genuine light becomes genuine darkness (see 8:20–22 for the same thought).

Bridging Contexts

THE POWER OF STORY. What we find in this chapter is the power of the well-told illustration. That power disarms us. When someone tries to make a point to us, we already have our guard up, thinking about the ways this idea might apply to us in uncomfortable ways. But with stories we lower our guard and simply enter into the experience. Sometimes we find ourselves forced to embrace ideas we never would have otherwise. That is what happened to David when Nathan told him the story of the poor man and his one lamb (2 Sam. 12:1–6). All the justifications David had created for his outrageous immoral behavior were blown away in an instant. The religious leaders of the Jews had the same experience when Jesus told the story of the wicked tenants. They had unconsciously admitted the logic of the argument before they realized there was an argument going on.

The point here is that we do not belong to ourselves. We are the workmanship of someone else. If that is so, that someone else had some purpose in mind for us when he worked on us. And if *that* is so, that person has a right to expect that his workmanship will yield the results he planned. If it does not, he has the right to do with his work whatever he chooses. The real issue, then, is whether we are the work of someone other than ourselves.

The Hebrews admitted this point, at least officially, but in practice many of them acted as if that were not so. So Isaiah is seeking to get them to recognize the illogical position in which they are living. If there is a God and if he is the sole Creator of the universe, then he has the right to expect us to live in accord with his purposes and character, especially if he has revealed them to us in the context of a mutual covenant.

Sins of the flesh and sins of the spirit. The particular behaviors that Isaiah chooses as expressions of the "bitter grapes" in Israel's life seem significant. They begin and end with social injustice. The astounding truth of the covenant is that how we treat each other is perhaps the most significant indicator of our relationship to God. This can be seen in the shape of the Ten Commandments, in which only four have to do with obviously "religious" behavior whereas fully six are behaviors that no one in the ancient world would have said have anything to do with one's relationship to the divine. But for God they do. If we are to be in a relationship with him, we must agree to treat one another fairly and with fundamental respect, recognizing that a person's life, possessions, reputation, and marriage are inviolable. This is so because God is a person and this is how he treats persons. If we are to be in a relationship with him, we must act as he does.

But how is such a thing possible in a world of limited resources? Only if we have committed our needs to a just and loving heavenly Father. Thus, all of the sins identified here have to do with the failure to admit that there is someone outside of ourselves who has the right to establish the parameters of our existence. It begins with simple greed, the desire for more, coupled with the failure to recognize that our desires are fundamentally insatiable and that the only way to control them is a conscious decision to stop. This is directly related to self-indulgence. If there is truly no one superior to our desires, then who can say when enough is enough? Comfort, pleasure, and security are absolute goods, and whatever seems to increase them cannot be spoken against.

But the more or less unconscious sins of greed and self-indulgence (sins of the flesh) grow out of a deeper attitudinal sin (sins of the spirit). These sins are the crystallization of what is implicit in greed and self-indulgence: My needs are all-important, and I have an absolute right to meet them as I see fit. The cynicism about God emerges as it becomes clear there is a conflict between what I want and what God's revealed will is. If there is no submission of my needs and myself to God at that moment, cynicism about him is the logical next step: "If God doesn't like what I am doing, let's see him stop it."

The next step is equally logical. It is the insistence that I have the right to determine for myself what is right and wrong. No one knows my needs

better than I do myself, so if the will of this so-called God is contrary to my needs as I feel them to be, that will must be false. It is not God's will at all, but the will of some other humans who are trying to use their power to frustrate me. If the biblical understanding of the perversion of the human capacity to form images is correct (Gen. 6:5), then it should come as no surprise that when humans create a moral system of their own, it is diametrically opposite to what the Bible identifies as God's moral system, calling right what he calls wrong, and vice versa.

The direct linkage of self-indulgence and social injustice in Isa. 5:22–23 demonstrates an important connection. There cannot be social justice until some persons decide that the meeting of their personal needs must be secondary to having the basic needs of others met. This will never happen until such persons come to the realization that God wishes to meet their needs and can do it better for them than they themselves can. Furthermore, they must commit themselves to the values of God, the builder of the vineyard. This God considers persons to be of absolute worth, and those who belong to him must see persons in a similar light.

The logic of life. Another truth that this passage underlines is the logic of life. This idea is not unique to this place in the book of Isaiah. Indeed, it is a theme that runs especially through chapters 1–39. But it is important to recognize it here. As mentioned earlier, we humans have a peculiarly warped view of the cause-and-effect relationship. We want the relationship to be ironclad when we consider it to work in our favor. But when it works against us, we are incensed. If we are obedient, we expect to be blessed, but if we are disobedient, we expect to be excused.

Isaiah is at pains to disabuse the Israelites of this idea. We cannot break the laws of nature and avoid the effects of that breaking. Neither can we avoid the effects of breaking the laws of the spirit. We were made to live in certain ways, and if we do not live in those ways, the results are predictable. Is there mercy upon genuine repentance? Of course. But has a person who consistently repeats the same sins ever genuinely repented? The Israelites expected to live lives of continuing disobedience, perform certain expensive rituals, and have mercy become the norm (see chapter 1 and the comments there). Isaiah says that is not the way it works.

Lordship of history. The final truth in the passage is God's lordship of history. It is fairly easy for us who have lived in a superficially Christian

culture all our lives to give lip service to this idea. However, for Isaiah and the other prophets it was positively revolutionary. It was not that the God of these two little countries, Israel and Judah, on the Mediterranean coast was going to fight it out with the gods of the great empires and come out as the top god. That would have been remarkable enough (and that is what the false prophets asserted). Rather, the true prophets asserted that Yahweh was already the Lord of those other countries (their gods being no gods at all), and he was using those nations to accomplish his disciplinary purposes among his people. Given the relative size and circumstances of Israel and Judah compared to Assyria and Babylon, this was an incredible leap of faith. Yet because of it, when the predicted destruction came, the believers were able to survive, knowing that far from having been defeated, Yahweh was behind all of what had happened.

Contemporary Significance

THE CRISIS OF WORLDVIEW. The Christian church today faces a crisis of major proportions. It is a crisis of worldview. Various thinkers, from Francis Schaeffer to Charles Colson,³ have alerted us to its coming, but it is now upon us. The issue is as new as today and as old as time. It is the question: Is there any meaning to life outside of myself and the meaning I give it? Our culture has come to the very concerted conclusion that there is not.

The implications of this conclusion are all around us, and they are profound. Like the ancients we recognize the obvious: A culture where lying and stealing are the norm cannot survive. So we give lip service to the prohibition of such behaviors. However, the fact is that a little judicious lying and stealing can help me meet my needs. So a whole society says one thing and does another. For two centuries a Christian ethic has dominated America. That is, we have obeyed the laws of the land because we believed that they fairly represented the laws of the Creator and Savior. We had an allegiance to something outside of ourselves, and so we obeyed the laws even when no one else was looking and even when it was not convenient. We became an unusually law-abiding people, and people from other countries still comment on the fact.

But all that is rapidly changing. We have lost the idea that there is a God outside of myself to whom I owe obedience. As a result, we increasingly

obey the laws of the land selectively. We obey only those laws that we think will benefit us individually and those we are forced to. But we have a hard time seeing the personal benefit in most laws, so we are becoming increasingly lawless, because there is not enough force in the world to make a nation of people obey if they do not want to obey. Tragically, we cannot see that we are enjoying the benefits of our ancestors' choices and that the way we are choosing will destroy those very benefits. We think we can gain more comfort, pleasure, and security by serving ourselves at all costs, when in fact the comfort, pleasure, and security we now enjoy are the result of persons who, in obedience to God, voluntarily limited their self-interests in the interest of others.

The challenge to the church is that this kind of thinking is creeping in among us as well. Studies show that Christian teenagers are almost as likely to cheat as are non-Christians. So also more than half of them think that there are no absolute moral standards.⁴ Divorces among evangelicals now exceed the national norm.⁵ What has happened? We are slowly losing our grip on the idea that there is a Creator whose character is absolutely consistent and who has created humans in his image. We are losing the idea that this Creator has built into his universe certain spiritual principles that are as unchangeable as any of the natural principles.

How has this happened? We are losing the idea of the authority of the Bible. In the end, there are only two ways of knowing. Either we learn from our experience, or we have information given us that is outside our experience. If God is other than the cosmos, we can never discover him from within our own experience. All we will find is ourselves. So if God wishes to be known by us, he will have to reveal himself to us. Is there any reason to think he has done this? Yes, there is. The Bible is unique in all the world.

This is not the place to go into all the arguments supporting that claim, but consider one example: The Old Testament contains the origins of monotheism as a thorough-going doctrine (see the introduction under "The Uniqueness of Yahweh"). The three monotheistic religions in the world—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—all go back to that single source. The same is true of many other doctrines. There is no adequate explanation of them apart from the one the Israelites give us: revelation.

Now the church in the West is locked in a do-or-die struggle. Of course the church will survive; that is a given. But will the church *in the West* survive? It will not if we allow the authority of the Bible to be taken from us. That is our only reason for existing. Why is greed wrong? Why is self-indulgence wrong? Why is it wrong to make up our own moral code? Why is it wrong to deprive the poor of justice? In the end, there is only one answer. They are wrong because the one Creator of the universe says so. They are wrong because that is not the way he acts and because he did not make us to act in those ways.

No other argument is sufficient. All of the utilitarian arguments will fall short. Why shouldn't I grab all I can? The commercials tell me I owe it to myself, and after all, life is short. You only go around once, and then the lights go out. Why shouldn't I lie? It pays off better than the truth does most of the time. To be sure, it makes life a little more challenging because you have to remember which lie you told to which person, but then nobody said life was easy. And as for the helpless, well, we will take care of them because they have their "rights." But those "rights" mean nothing when they conflict with convenience (the unborn) or expense (the aged).

In the end, unless the authority for moral behavior lies beyond ourselves, wrong will rapidly become right, and right will become wrong, as we see happening apace in our society. So insistence that homosexual behavior is wrong becomes an act of hatred or fear. The "nuclear family" is said to be one of the main sources of paranoia and oppression. Self-sacrifice is stupid, and marital faithfulness is banal, if not hypocritical.

Thus, it is incumbent on the church to reaffirm and strengthen our commitment to the authority of God's revelation. If we compromise on this issue, we will have lost our reason to exist. The salt will have lost its saltiness indeed (Matt. 5:13), and we will deserve the logical conclusion Jesus declared: being thrown out.

Submission and sacrifice. Fundamental to this entire discussion is the issue of submission. In his book *Before Philosophy* Henri Frankfort says that the Hebrews replaced the pagan myth of nature with the myth of the will of God.⁸ We may argue with him over his definition and use of the term *myth* (he basically means "religious system"), but his observation is acute. The religions of the peoples surrounding Israel saw the meaning of life in the recurring cycles of nature, where there was neither purpose nor goal but

only the exercise of power. But the Israelites understood that God had a purpose for human life outside of those recurring cycles and that it had to do with how they lived their lives. This is the same point that the apostle Paul makes in the well-known opening sentences of Romans 12:1–2:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is —his good, pleasing and perfect will.

God has an intentional will for his people. He intends that they live in a certain way that is the result of a spiritual decision affecting how they conduct their bodies. This decision involves sacrifice, the conscious giving up of something to God, and it will lead them to live in ways that are contrary to the way the rest of the world lives. Paul is saying nothing here other than what is found throughout the entire Old Testament. The difference for Paul is that now a whole new motivation for the sacrifice has been revealed: the incredible self-sacrifice of God on our behalf in his Son.

But exactly what is it that we are to sacrifice? What is the something we are to give up to God? Genesis 2 makes it perfectly clear. We are to surrender two things: our right to decide what is right and wrong for us, and our right to supply our own needs for ourselves. Because our first mother and father refused to make that surrender, what Paul calls "the pattern of this world" was firmly established. It is the pattern of pleasing myself by satisfying my desires at all costs and of determining what is right and wrong for me on the basis of what I believe will most nearly achieve that satisfaction.

By contrast, we see another way in the stories of the patriarchs Abraham and Joseph (Gen. 12–50). If we surrender the supplying of our needs to God, we will no longer need to be grasping, self-serving people. We see an Abraham voluntarily giving up the best land to his nephew Lot (13:5–12), and we see a Joseph who chooses to be chaste under enormous pressure (39:8–9) and who is delivered from hating his brothers for what they did to

him (50:17–21). Here is the victory over greed, self-indulgence, cynicism, moral perversion, and social injustice. We surrender our lives to God, knowing that he will supply our truest needs in better ways than we ever can, as we submit to his will and walk in it.

In this walk, however, we must be careful not to demand immediate results. For instance, Isaiah spoke of the logical consequences that follow from disobedience to God's will. But while the exile of Israel occurred within Isaiah's lifetime, the exile of Judah did not actually occur for another 150 years. It would have been easy for some of those to whom Isaiah was speaking to retort that if there are such logical consequences to sin, where were they? In fact, that may be exactly what prompted the people referred to in Isa. 5:18–19 to say what they did.

The writer of Psalm 73 seems to have had a similar experience when he was moved to ask why the wicked seemed always to prosper. In that case, as well as in Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds, the answer is to take the long view. So in Psalm 73 the writer says that he was saved from betraying God's people (denying God's moral logic) by taking the long view and seeing the final destiny of the wicked from God's perspective (73:15–17). Jesus says much the same thing when he says that the weeds will be permitted to flourish until the final harvest, when they will be separated out and cast into the fire (Matt. 13:24–30). There are consequences to sin, but they are administered in God's time, not ours. Thus, we must not only surrender our needs to God as we choose to live within his will, but we must also surrender the outcomes to God, secure in the knowledge that those outcomes are certain, but they are in his time.

Isaiah 6:1–13

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. ²Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. ³And they were calling to one another:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."

⁴At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

5"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."

⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

⁹He said, "Go and tell this people:

""Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving."

10 Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes.

Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."

¹¹Then I said, "For how long, O Lord?" And he answered:

"Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, 12 until the LORD has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken. 13 And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land."

Original Meaning

As I stated in the introduction (see Authorship and Date), I believe the first six chapters of the book are not in chronological order of their writing. Rather, they have been placed in this order so that Isaiah can make a theological point: If the "people of unclean lips" (6:5) can have the same experience that he, the "man of unclean lips" had, then the dilemma Isaiah sees in Israel, and which he expresses in chapters 1–5, can be solved. That dilemma is: How can the present corrupt, rebellious Israel (as expressed in Judah), defying God's instruction, ever become the promised clean, obedient Israel from whom all the nations will learn that instruction? By placing his call narrative in the unusual place where it is, Isaiah is holding it up as a model. Just as he was enabled to bear God's message to his people, so, by the same process, Israel will be enabled to bear God's message to the world.

This narrative is tightly organized, without a single wasted word. It begins with a vision of God (6:1–4), in which his majesty, transcendence, and holiness are emphasized. There follows Isaiah's cry of dereliction, in which he testifies to the terrible self-knowledge that has come because of the vision (6:5). He recognizes that what separates him from God is not finitude but moral corruption, and he knows that such corruption cannot coexist with the God who has been revealed to him. But, amazingly, God is not willing for Isaiah to be destroyed, because one of God's flaming ministers comes to the prophet with a blazing coal from the altar. With it he cauterizes Isaiah's lips and pronounces him clean (6:6–7). Only then is the voice of God heard asking in a rather off-handed way who might be willing to carry a message for him.

Isaiah, exulting in the new-found cleanness of his lips, makes himself available to go (6:8), and God responds with a shocking commission: Isaiah is to speak a message that will harden the people's hearts and prevent them from being healed (6:9–10). When Isaiah asks how long he is to go on preaching in this way (6:11a), God's response is even more frightening. He is to preach until the whole nation is like a field of burned-out stumps (6:11b–13). But at the very end of verse 13, there is an enigmatic glimpse of hope when it is said, "the holy seed will be the stump in the land."

The passage contains a number of exegetical issues that can only be touched on here. First of all, it should be noted that the careful dating of the experience cannot be accidental. In a document this terse, no merely casual information is included. So why is it significant that Isaiah's call occurs in the year King Uzziah dies? I believe it is because it is with Uzziah's death that Judah's truly hopeless situation emerges.

The date is approximately 740 B.C. By this time the Assyrian emperor Tiglath-Pileser III has clearly established himself as a military conqueror to be feared. But it seems likely that for Judah, as long as the powerful Uzziah was on the throne (even with his son Jotham acting as the front man), the immediacy of the threat was blurred. But when Uzziah was removed from the scene, the danger could no longer be ignored. Jotham was no strong man, and possibly Jotham's son Ahaz was already under the control of a pro-Assyrian party in the government. What could possibly be done? Isaiah's vision, at least for him, was a reorienting of his moral compass. The

king was dead? Who is the king in this world anyway? "My eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty!" (6:5).²

As already noted, the images and language used to describe God emphasize majesty ("seated on a throne"), transcendence ("high and exalted," "the train of his robe filled the temple," "the temple was filled with smoke"), and holiness ("Holy, holy, holy"). In the ancient Near East "holy" was not used especially widely, and when it was used, it was not given special prominence. It merely denoted that which sets deity, and that which belongs to deity, apart from the common. It had no moral connotations—and could not, given the variety of moral behaviors among the gods.

But for the Hebrews, the idea of the holy was decidedly different. Beginning with Exodus 6:3 and continuing on through 19:6 and throughout the entire Old Testament, the word "holy" is given special prominence in describing Israel's God, occurring in all its forms more than eight hundred times. This is as it should be, for the people of Israel had learned that there is only one being who is truly other than this world, and they had learned that it was his character, even more than his essence, that set him apart from us humans.

This is why Isaiah knew there was no hope for him once he had heard the seraphs describe the Lord as the absolutely Holy One (the triple "holy" expresses the superlative). He knew that his character was utterly unlike that of the Holy One. If there were any question whether "unclean" had moral connotations (after all, altars and ceremonial vessels could be "unclean" too), all doubt is dispelled when, after touching Isaiah's lips with the coal, the seraph pronounces that Isaiah's "guilt" has been "taken away" and his "sin atoned for."

But why does Isaiah say that his lips are unclean? Why not his heart? Two suggestions may be offered. (1) It may be that the lips are being referred to as the evidence of what is really in the heart.³ What is actually emerging in Isaiah's life shows that whatever he might say about his heart, it is unclean. James refers to the "tongue" in this way (James 3:9–12), as Jesus also does the "mouth" (Matt. 15:18). (2) But a related possibility is that having just heard the golden tones of the seraphs, Isaiah knows that his lips, having been used to praise himself, put others down, and generally serve his own ends, could never be used in such holy service. This relates

closely "the tongue" to the whole idea of commissioning and seems the most likely use here, insofar as it to some extent includes aspects of the first possibility.

Isaiah sees his situation as being so hopeless that he does not even bother to ask for cleansing or deliverance. But here he underestimates the grace of God. God has not given him this vision in order to annihilate him, and he does not bring the fire in order to destroy the offending lips. Rather, as would be true for the nation, he brings these terrifying things into the prophet's life in order that, having seen the truth of God and of himself and having received the gracious provision of cleansing fire, he might be delivered into his true vocation.

The tone of the divine question deserves some comment. Isaiah 6 is the only instance of a prophetic calling where there is no direct call. There is no obvious explanation why this is so. It may be that the especially difficult nature of the assignment called for a volunteer rather than a conscript, but none of the true prophets had an easy assignment. At any rate, the prophet's experience of the divine grace clearly puts him in a position where he wants to be of service to this holy Sovereign of the universe.⁴

But note the surprising nature of the commission. Does God truly not want his people to be healed? Has he predestined them for destruction? That would surely be a misreading of the book as a whole. God clearly does want to heal his people and promises to do so. If nothing else, the promises of chapters 2 and 4 make that clear. But those promises are not alone. They are representative of many other promises throughout the book.

So what could Isaiah 6:9–10 possibly mean? Perhaps the point is this: Suppose Isaiah had chosen to be among the false prophets; suppose he had preached a message of affirmation and encouragement that did not address the people's sin directly. It is possible he could have gained a large number of followers, people who were "healed" and convinced that they ought to make more of a place for "God" in their lives. But would this superficial healing have any long-term effects on the destiny of the nation? Only detrimental ones! And we can be sure we would never have heard of that Isaiah.

Rather, Isaiah is called upon to preach a message that, given the alreadyhardened hearts of his generation and several of the following, will only push them farther away from God. But some will turn, among them faithful followers of Isaiah, who will preserve his words until the day when the cauterizing fires of the Exile fall and there will finally be a generation willing to listen. Then real healing will result, and the stage will be set for the promised Messiah to come. So Isaiah's calling is not to success as the world counts success, but to faithfulness. And because he accepts that difficult commission, we still read his book twenty-seven centuries later.

This understanding also illuminates the enigmatic final sentence of the narrative. The only hope of healing for these people is in near total destruction. It is only when all is lost that a scrap of hope appears. There is no other way. If these people are allowed to continue as they are, there really is no hope. Their religion is already half-pagan, and if they are allowed to continue, they will ultimately be completely pagan and all of the revelation will have been for nothing.

But God is not going to allow that to happen, either to his revelation or to his people. So the cleansing must be frighteningly thorough. But afterward, when the forest has been felled and even the remaining stumps have been burned, one of those stumps will still have life in it. There seem to be two possible referents for "holy seed." One is to the Messiah. The promises of Genesis 3:15 and 22:18 seem to point in this direction. Also the references to tree parts to describe the Messiah in Isaiah lends support ("branch," semaḥ [4:2]; "shoot," ḥoṭer, and "branch," neṣer [11:1]). However, the fact that the word rendered "stump" in "stump of Jesse" in 11:1 is šereš instead of the maṣṣebah as here in 6:13 prevents us from saying that the connotation of Messiah is certain. The other possibility seems slightly more likely, that it refers to the remnant, the people of God. The recurring use of "seed" to refer to Abraham's descendants in Genesis supports this idea. In any case, there is hope that the nation will survive in some way.

Bridging Contexts

THE OVERALL MESSAGE of this narrative needs little translation to make it intelligible for our day. However, there are a few points that should be commented upon. (1) The pattern of the events is important. The process of becoming a servant of God begins in our recognition of the hopelessness of our situation. It continues in an adequate recognition of the character and nature of God. That will necessarily result in a shattering recognition of the

impossible gulf between us and God—the gulf of our sinfulness. But that makes it possible to recognize and receive the incredible and undeserved grace of God that cleanses us. Then at long last we are ready to get a glimpse of the heart of God and to offer ourselves to him in service. But that experience of grace is not in order that we can win the praise of humans or even necessarily to fulfill our own dreams. It is in order that we can be faithful to the call of God no matter where it takes us. Far too many sermons on Isaiah 6 end at verse 8 with "Here am I. Send me." To be faithful to the full intent of the chapter, we must preach the entire passage.

- (2) A second issue is the meaning of the phrase "the train [or hem] of his robe filled the temple" (6:1). If just the hem of his garment filled the temple, then how big was the throne? And how big was the One sitting on the throne? In other words, words fail to describe the greatness of this God. They can rise no higher than the hem of his robe. This is analogous to the words of the elders in Exodus 24 when they return from feasting with God on the mountain and report that "under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself" (Ex. 24:10). Words stop at the pavement. God is utterly outside our categories. To try to describe him in terms of the created world is always to fail. That is why it was necessary for him to translate himself into our terms and come to us as one of us—Jesus Christ.
- (3) Throughout the Bible, fire is the symbol of God. The flaming swords of Genesis 3 symbolize his unapproachable holiness that forever barred sinful Adam and Eve from going back to the simple fellowship they once knew. On Sinai, it was a bush that was burning but not consumed. Later it was the fire descending on the mountain. Then it was the fire blazing forth and consuming Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:1). There was the fire of Gideon's torches and the fire that fell from heaven, consuming Elijah's sacrifice on Mount Carmel. Fire is destructive, yet cleansing; it is frightening, yet fascinating; it turns mass into energy; what it consumes it leaves dark, but in the process makes light.

In this context it is probable that the word "seraph" connotes "burning one." God's very ministers are flames. Thus, it is entirely appropriate that it is fire that touches Isaiah's lips. It is not merely that sin must be consumed in his life and that the instrument he would use to declare God's Word must have the dross burned out of it. Rather, it is an encounter with the very

person of God himself. Thus too, it is not at all surprising that Isaiah later asks, "Who of us can dwell with everlasting burning?" (Isa. 33:14; see also 10:16; 30:27).

Apparently it was not a major issue to Isaiah which altar the coal came from. It may have been the incense altar before the Most Holy Place. But from what we know of the means of God's grace in the New Testament, it is tempting to think of the coal that touched his lips as a piece of charred, smoking lamb's flesh from off the altar of sacrifice.

Contemporary Significance

SEEING GOD AND SERVING GOD. It is foolish for us to think that we can somehow serve God until we have come to the end of ourselves. As long as we think there is some hope of a human solution to our problems, there is little chance of our genuinely seeing God. Nor is there hope for any of us becoming servants of the living God without there first being an adequate understanding of who he is. As long as I think that I can solve my problems (with a little help from God, of course), then I am the sovereign and he is the servant.

This is the position in which Jacob was between Genesis 28 and 32. Yes, he had seen God in the dream and had gotten a glimpse of both his transcendence and his immanence. But still it is clear that God is only an adjunct to Jacob's plans. It is only when Jacob comes to the end of himself in Genesis 32 that he understands that God is not an adjunct but is Jacob's only hope. It is no accident that having seen God face to face, Jacob can step out in front of his family to meet his fate and see not an enemy, a competitor, a rival in his brother, but "the face of God" (Gen. 33:10).

Only when we come to the end of ourselves are we ready to see God, and that vision is absolutely essential to genuine service. Many years ago J. B. Phillips wrote an influential little book entitled *Your God Is Too Small.* The title says it all. Phillips argued that especially evangelicals with their correct stress on the reality of an intimate, personal relationship with God are in danger of creating a God who exists only to serve them. In the ensuing fifty years since that book appeared, the trend has gone, if anything, in the opposite way from the one Phillips was arguing for. We have made God our "good buddy" in the sky, or a blind, half-senile grandfather who says, "Oh,

that's ok, honey," when we mess up. So much of our worship is ultimately about us and the good feelings we get when we envision ourselves in the television eye lost in a paroxysm of praise.

As a result, God's grace has become horribly cheapened. It is something he all but owes us, since he knows that basically all of us are pretty good people who just can't help messing up once in awhile. How we need a vision of the blazing holiness of God. How we need to be crushed under the awareness of a Being who is greater than the entire known universe (which is one meaning of "the whole earth is full of his glory," Isa. 6:3). How we need to come face to face with a white-hot moral perfection in the presence of which sin cannot even exist. Will "Boomers" and "X-ers" sit still for this? What generation ever has? So will we be like Isaiah, or will we become one of the false prophets?

In part, the answer to that question depends on whether we ourselves have ever had such an experience of God. Should we expect something as Isaiah had? Of course not. God is infinitely creative and hates doing the same thing twice. But we can expect that God wishes each of us to confront the truths about him as Isaiah did.

When we have seen God in that way, we will know that God owes us nothing. We are not "basically nice folks with an unfortunate tendency to mess up." We are proud, arrogant, self-centered, perverse, cruel, violent rebels in whom the stain of sin and sinfulness goes down to the last atom in the last molecule. We do not just "mess up." We "sin" (6:7). That is, we consciously and unconsciously miss the targets God has set up for his creatures. And that sin (Heb. <code>haṭṭ'ah</code>) is a result of an inner twistedness (Heb. 'awon) that is both the cause ("iniquity," see 53:6; 61:8) and the result ("guilt," 6:7) of sin. We no more have the "right" to God's love than a bale of hay has the "right" to live in a blast furnace. "Rights" don't enter into the question; the two things are simply utterly incompatible.

There is a strong likelihood that until we come to an understanding of ourselves like this, we will treat the grace of God—his unfailing, undeserved love—as a throwaway item: "Of course God loves me; that's his job." No, it is not his job. It is an unimaginable, unexpected, and, indeed, unnecessary wonder of the universe. If we see God as he is and ourselves as we are, then like Isaiah, it will not even occur to us to ask for continued life. Obviously, it is an impossibility. However, to the eternal

praise of God, it is not an impossibility. God has found a way, amazing as it is to think of, to satisfy both his holiness and his love.

Clearly, Isaiah was never able to escape the wonder of this all his life, and we should never do so either. What is that way? Whatever altar the burning coal may have actually come from, we know that the way was the cross. God's death became the means of our life. Here the connection between Isaiah 6 and 53 is unmistakable. How could God possibly restore his people to himself? Yes, they had suffered double for their sins (40:2). But what does that accomplish? Does punishment restore relationship? No, it only satisfies justice—and the only real punishment for sin is death. So how can God keep from simply wiping his people—including us—off the face of the earth? The answer is the Servant who gives his life for his Father's, and his own, loved ones. Does this story grow old and boring for some of us? Do we often think that God is asking too much of us? What does that say about our grasp of what it is Christ has done for us?

If we have the kind of wonder at God's grace that Isaiah had, we will not have to be compelled into his service. Have you ever heard anyone testify that he or she had always wanted to be a preacher of the gospel but that God had forced this person to become an orthodontist? I have not. But we have all heard many people tell how they were dragged kicking and screaming into the Lord's service. Why is that? I suspect it is because we have grown up never really feeling the wonder of having been forgiven of our sins and given new life.

Our Christian calling. And what are the servants of God called to? We need a strong dose of Isaiah 6 to counter the "prosperity gospel" of these days. Which of the true prophets were wealthy and comfortable? Where was the palace Jesus Christ lived in on earth? Which of the apostles died in his own bed? It is amazing that contemporary followers of Jesus and the apostles and prophets can speak of their Christianity as though it were a stock investment. Jesus did not call his followers to take up their portfolios and follow him. Neither did the Father of the Lord Jesus call Isaiah to worldwide success with millions of followers trailing after him wide-eyed, pressing cash contributions upon him.

Where are the Christians today who will leave their worship palaces and their luxury automobiles and their stock options to take up the cross of Christ even in sacrificial giving to the cause of Christ? Where are the young people who will stop looking for careers in sports and entertainment and rather choose, like the gifted cricket player C. T. Studd, to become nobodies in order to tell the broken and the outcast of the holy God who has died for them because he loves them? Of course there are such persons today, and there will be until the Lord returns. But in Christian America there are not enough. The fire has not touched our lips so that we can taste the candy better. Nor has it touched our lips so that we can become golden-tongued orators. Rather, the burning sacrifice of Christ has been laid on us so that we too will be able to lay down our lives for the gracious God and for those who will hear whenever that becomes possible.

That was the kind of faithfulness that marked the apostles. It comes as a surprise to many people to learn that the portion of Isaiah that is quoted most often in the New Testament is Isaiah 6:9–10, the passage about the deafening, blinding, hardening effect of Isaiah's preaching. Clearly the apostles found the experience of Isaiah helpful in making sense of their own. It seems that the more they preached Jesus, the more their own people turned away from him. The more they called for repentance, the more the Jewish people refused to listen. In that sense, they were failures.

Yet this did not cause them to lose hope. They knew the grace they had received, and they knew the call of God on their lives. So, like Isaiah, they were "prepared in season and out of season" (2 Tim. 4:2) to declare God's truth, confident that those who should listen would listen. This is the mandate of modern servants of God as well.

Isaiah 7:1–25

WHEN AHAZ SON of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, was king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and Pekah son of Remaliah king of Israel marched up to fight against Jerusalem, but they could not overpower it.

²Now the house of David was told, "Aram has allied itself with Ephraim"; so the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.

³Then the LORD said to Isaiah, "Go out, you and your son Shear-Jashub, to meet Ahaz at the end of the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Washerman's Field. ⁴Say to him, 'Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood—because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and of the son of Remaliah. ⁵Aram, Ephraim and Remaliah's son have plotted your ruin, saying, ⁶"Let us invade Judah; let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves, and make the son of Tabeel king over it." ⁷Yet this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

"'It will not take place, it will not happen, ⁸for the head of Aram is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is only Rezin.

Within sixty-five years

Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people.

⁹The head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah's son.

If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all."

¹⁰Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, ¹¹"Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights."

¹²But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test."

13Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also?

14Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. 15He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. 16But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste. 17The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah—he will bring the king of Assyria."

¹⁸In that day the LORD will whistle for flies from the distant streams of Egypt and for bees from the land of Assyria. ¹⁹They will all come and settle in the steep ravines and in the crevices in the rocks, on all the thornbushes and at all the water holes. ²⁰In that day the Lord will use a razor hired from beyond the River—the king of Assyria—to shave your head and the hair of your legs, and to take off your beards also. ²¹In that day, a man will keep alive a young cow and two goats. ²²And because of the abundance of the milk they give, he will have curds to eat. All who remain in the land will eat curds and honey. ²³In that day, in every place where there were a thousand vines worth a thousand silver shekels, there will be only briers and thorns. ²⁴Men will go there with bow and arrow, for the land will be covered with briers and thorns. ²⁵As for all the hills

once cultivated by the hoe, you will no longer go there for fear of the briers and thorns; they will become places where cattle are turned loose and where sheep run.

Original Meaning

STRUCTURE OF ISAIAH 7–12. One of the difficult features of Isaiah is deciding whether transitional passages should be assigned to the previous section or to the following one. This is true for chapter 6. In one sense it is the logical conclusion of chapters 1–5, providing the answer for the question implicit in those chapters. But in another sense it is the opening chapter not only of the next section (chs. 7–12) but of the entire division (chs. 7–39).

As I mentioned in the introduction, all of these chapters are united by the theme of trust in God instead of human nations. Chapters 7–12, which discuss the consequences of refusal to trust in a specific historic setting, are directly paralleled by chapters 36–39, where God's trustworthiness is demonstrated in a subsequent and related historic setting. The prophet is attempting to present his people with the vision of God that has come to him, which is the foundation of all true servanthood. This God, the Holy One of Israel, is great enough and wise enough and transcendent enough that he can be trusted. If Israel can only get that vision of Yahweh, there will be hope for them. But as the Lord predicted, Isaiah's message falls on deaf ears, and his vision is unintelligible to blind eyes. Yet Isaiah is faithful, and all later history is the beneficiary of his faithfulness.

In chapters 7–12 the predicted rejection of Isaiah's message is immediate. King Ahaz would rather trust his ultimate enemy Assyria to deliver him from his troubles with Israel and Syria than he would risk trusting God. To this, Isaiah replies with the sign of Immanuel—God with us (7:14–15). Whether Ahaz admits it or not, God is with Israel, and that is not good news if Israel rejects him. So in 7:16–8:22 the prophet talks about the tragic consequences of trusting your worst enemy while trying to leave the transcendent God out of the equation of your life.

Yet, as has been said frequently already, God's ultimate purpose is not destruction. If fearful, distrusting humans have brought darkness on

themselves (8:21–22) and if God has let that darkness come, he still does not intend to leave them there. Thus, in chapter 9 the prophet announces that in the very place where the Assyrian depredations started—that is, Galilee—there will God's light dawn. It is the light of a child-king, a descendant of David, who will rule in justice and peace. So there is a double reason to trust God: (1) He is God and there is no other; (2) when we rebel against him, refusing to trust him, and when we reap the results of such a foolish choice, God comes in mercy to deliver. Surely, such a God should be trusted (see 12:1–3).

Thus, Isaiah says in 9:8–10:4, it is not Israel or Syria, nor even Assyria, with which Judah must come to terms. It is the holy God. And what is it about the holy God we must come to terms with? Is it his power, or his sovereignty, or even his will for history? It is none of these. Instead, it is his moral character. If we are not living in keeping with that moral character, we are out of his will and out from under his protection. But if we choose to live in that obedient covenant relationship with him, we need fear nothing.

That is the theme of 10:5–34. In the end, Assyria need not be feared because that mighty empire is only a tool in the hand of Judah's covenant Lord. The Assyrians may arrogantly think that they rule their own destiny, but they do not. The day will come when God will cut them down like a mighty forest. Then he will set up that kingdom promised in 9:1–7. There a Spirit-filled Messiah will rule a "peaceable kingdom," where none will hurt or destroy (11:1–16), and at that time all those exiled to the ends of the earth will return (11:12).

Chapter 12 is a reflection on what all this means about the trustworthiness of God. Surely the God who will not give his people up to final destruction but will deliver them and set them up in a kingdom of the true Davidic monarch can be trusted. More than that, surely his glorious exploits should be told to all the earth.

Isaiah 7:1–8:22 forms the first unit of thought in chapters 7–12. They deal with the immediate, tragic consequences of Ahaz's refusal to trust in God and his turning to Assyria for help. Within this unit, it is possible to further subdivide 7:1–25 from 8:1–22. Chapter 7 presents Isaiah's call for trust (vv. 1–9) and the sign of Immanuel (vv. 10–25). Chapter 8 addresses the effects of Ahaz's bad choice in greater detail.

The Call to Trust (7:1–9)

WHILE WE DO NOT KNOW the precise date of the events described in these verses, it seems probable that they occur about 735 B.C., about three years before the conquest of Damascus in 732 and thirteen years before the destruction of Samaria in 722 (see comments on 7:15 and 8:4). We do not know the specific reason why Syria and Israel are attacking Judah. However, it seems probable that they are attempting to force Judah to join a coalition with them against the Assyrians. It appears that Hezekiah did something similar to the Philistines in 705, when he led a revolt against Sennacherib. It is also possible that Ahaz has already allied himself with the Assyrians, and the kings of Syria and Israel are seeking to punish him for this. (Ahaz calls himself the "servant and vassal" of Tiglath-Pileser when he asks for help in 2 Kings 16:7.)

At any rate, the two neighboring kingdoms are attacking Judah with the express purpose of deposing Ahaz and putting someone named Tabeel on the throne in his place (Isa. 7:6). It is little wonder that Ahaz and his courtiers are so frightened; they are like "trees shaken by the wind" (7:2).

The exact location of "the aqueduct of the Upper Pool on the road to the Washerman's Field" (7:3) is unknown. But it is evidently just outside the city walls and close enough so that someone standing there and speaking in a loud voice can be heard by those sitting on the wall. We know this because this is the same place where the Assyrian officer stood and demanded the city's surrender thirty-four years later (36:2, 11–15). Most likely Ahaz is looking over the city's water supply in preparation for the coming siege. While there were no fool-proof procedures for breaking into a well-defended, walled city, it was possible to force such a city to surrender if its water supply could be cut off. Ahaz wants to be sure that such a thing does not happen.

Throughout chapters 7–11 children are important figures, and this is especially true in chapters 7–8, where three children are presented, all with names symbolic of what Isaiah is predicting. At least two of them are Isaiah's own children. The first is presented here, accompanying his father to confront the king (7:3). This child's name is Shear-Jashub, which means "only a remnant will return." We may wonder if the child was born after the call experience in Isaiah 6, when God gave Isaiah the awareness that the only hope for the future was in a remnant.

At any rate, if Isaiah introduces his son to the king, the conversation may have started off on a rather grim note! However, with God there is always hope. Whatever the more distant future may hold, that does not precondition Ahaz's choices. He can choose to live and act faithfully in his own time and in so doing experience the blessing of God both on his own life and on the life of his kingdom. That is what Isaiah has come to plead with Ahaz to do.

The prophet addresses the king's fearfulness, telling him that it is not necessary (7:4–9). He uses no less than four different terms in verse 4 to address this fear: The king must keep watch ("be careful") over his emotions ("keep calm") and not "be afraid"; fear should not cause his heart, the center of thought, will and action, to grow weak ("lose heart"). The reason Ahaz need not quake in fear is that Rezin of Damascus and Pekah of Samaria² do not really pose a threat. For all their bluster they are unable to do anything (7:1). They are just like the burned-out ends of logs remaining around the edges of the campfire when the real fire has gone out. They may still be "smoldering," but there is no genuine fire there, and Ahaz need not fear them.

In the end it does not matter what Rezin and Pekah say (7:5–6). It only matters what the "Sovereign LORD" (lit., "the Lord Yahweh") says, and he says that their threats will amount to nothing. In fact, in "sixty-five years" the northern kingdom of Israel (symbolized here by the dominant tribe in the north, "Ephraim") will not even exist as a people. It is not clear what this sixty-five years refers to. Probably it is a way of saying that within one person's lifetime (by about 670 B.C.) the deportations of the Israelites (beginning in 722) and the importing of groups from other areas in the empire will have completely diluted the genetic heritage of those remaining in the home area of the northern kingdom (this was the Samaria of the New Testament). Far from being a dominating kingdom, they would not even be a people.

Isaiah concludes his appeal to trust God and not to give way to fear with an aphoristic challenge that uses a Hebrew wordplay. He uses two forms of the root 'mn, which means "to be firm, stable." He says, "If you do not stand firm in your faith ['mn], you will not stand at all ['mn]." That is, "if you do not 'make firm' (believe), you cannot 'be firm." The NIV captures the idea fairly closely. Unless Ahaz puts his faith in God and what God has

said through his prophet, then he will have to give way to fear. But if he will firmly believe in God, then he can stand in quiet confidence no matter how desperate the immediate circumstances may appear.

The Sign of Immanuel (7:10–25)

GOD TAKES AHAZ a step further by offering him a sign to prompt faith. It can be of any magnitude that Ahaz likes: high as heaven or deep as hell. In other words, God is asking Ahaz to be daring in reaching out to him in faith. In some ways, this is Ahaz's last chance. Had he picked up the challenge at this point, who can say how his own story and the story of his nation might have been different? That may be one explanation for the extreme nature of the offer: God is "pulling out all the stops" to try to move the Judean king to faith.

But Ahaz refuses the challenge (7:12). Maddeningly, he does so with an appeal to piety. He says that to ask God for a sign would be to test God, something forbidden in the Torah (Num. 14:22; Deut. 6:16). But the testing referred to in the Torah is not believing God's promises! To obey the command of God and step out in faith in his promises is nothing like the rebellions in the desert, where the Israelites doubted God's goodness and essentially dared him to do what he had said he would. Ahaz's supposed piety is only a mask for the same kind of unbelief.

Isaiah clearly recognizes this as he responds with frustration (7:13). Ahaz has already tried his people's "patience," perhaps with the huge tribute he has sent to Tiglath-Pileser (2 Kings 16:8). Now he is trying the patience of God. It is one thing for the people to wonder how much longer they must put up with this pro-Assyrian king, but things move to an entirely different level when God begins to wonder how much longer he must put up with that king. Such a king is on thin ice indeed.

So God says he will give Ahaz a sign anyway. The sign that Isaiah offers (7:14) has provoked endless controversy, largely because of Matthew's identification of its fulfillment in Christ (Matt. 1:23). If it were not for this fact, there appears to be little in the sign itself to arouse such emotion. On the surface the sign seems to be that before a child conceived at the time of the saying is twelve years of age, the two nations that so frighten the house of David will be destroyed (Isa. 7:16).

However, there are three factors in the sign itself that raise some question about this apparently straightforward interpretation. (1) God himself urges Ahaz to ask for a remarkable sign. On the surface there seems nothing remarkable about the sign that God actually gives. (2) The second unusual feature is the choice of the word used to identify the mother of the child. The word used is not the normal one for "woman" ("iššah) or "girl" (na'arah), but a relatively unusual one meaning "young woman of marriageable age" ('almah). When we discover that the LXX translates the word with "virgin" (parthenos), the mystery is deepened. (3) Finally, the choice of a name for the child is a bit strange since its immediate relevance to the historic situation is not clear, whereas there is a direct relevance in the names of the other two children mentioned (Shear-Jashub [7:3]; Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz [8:3]). The mention of this second child highlights another oddity. The verbs describing the conception, birth, and naming of that child there are the same as those in 7:14.

Taken together, all of these suggest that there is more going on in this sign than meets the eye and that Matthew has not merely (mis-)appropriated some ancient text for his own purposes, as some modern commentators suggest he did.⁴ I believe that the sign as originally given had a single meaning but a double significance. Its meaning is that God is with us and we need not fear what other human beings may do to us. The first significance is for Ahaz's own day. He need not go to Assyria because God is with Judah.

But is that just a sentiment? Is it just a theological assertion, or is it based on fact? Is God *really* with us? The answer to the question is "yes." God has come to take up residence with us as one of us. How has that fact been accomplished? By giving him a human mother but no human father. This is the reason for the use of the ambiguous word 'almah. In its first significance the virginity of the mother at the time of the announcement of the sign is all that is being intended. Thus, the typical word for "virgin" (betulah) is not used; it would have called too much attention to itself. Yet for the real significance of the sign to be realized, the virginity of the mother at the time of the birth is critical. Thus, the common words for "woman" or "girl" cannot be used.

The fact that 'almah has the definite article suggests that Isaiah is identifying a particular woman. Some have suggested that this is a wife of

Ahaz, who will be the mother of Hezekiah. There are two difficulties with this proposal. One is the unlikelihood that Hezekiah could have been born as late as 734 B.C., especially if the 726 date for his accession is accepted. The other is the use of the word 'almah' itself. There seems to be no reason to use it if the referent is to the queen or a member of the harem. They are already married, and the word does not appear to be used elsewhere of an already-married woman. Another possibility, and one that seems more likely to me in the light of 8:1–3, is that Isaiah is referring to the young woman he is about to marry, who is standing there in the crowd.

At any rate, before this child who is shortly to be conceived is able "to reject the wrong and choose the right" (7:15–16), Syria and Israel will be destroyed. This phrase most likely refers to the age of accountability, the time when, in later parlance, a boy became a "son of the commandment." Although this is now considered to occur at age twelve, there is no precise statement of the age in the Bible. As mentioned above, this suggests that the encounter narrated here takes place by 735 B.C., some twelve or thirteen years before the fall of Samaria and the final destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel.

Commentators are divided as to the significance of the two statements about eating "curds and honey" (7:15, 22). Some see it as a reference to deprivation, since the context of 7:22 suggests the destruction and depopulation of the agricultural land. In other words, all that will be left to eat will be a little curdled milk and some honey. However, while it is correct that 7:23–25 do depict agricultural disaster, the reference itself may have an ironic twist. Typically, curds and honey were the food of royalty, but Isaiah seems to be saying that there will be so few people left in the land after the Assyrian incursions that they will be able to eat like kings on what is left (7:21–22).

In this light, the sign has a double implication. On the one hand, the young boy will see a day when Judah will no longer need to fear either Syria or Israel; they will be gone. But on the other hand, they will have been replaced with something infinitely worse: rampaging Assyria (7:17, 20). In the nearly two hundred years since the division of Solomon's kingdom, there had been no major political changes on the east coast of the Mediterranean. Now all that is to change dramatically as Assyria wipes out nation after nation in a matter of about fifty years (7:17).

Thus, the child is a sign that God is with Judah in two ways, one positive and the other negative. Since God is with them, they need not fear their two small neighbors. But since they have refused to trust God and have instead put all their trust in their worst enemy, they are going to find out what a disastrous mistake that is. To leave God out of the equation of their lives and their planning because of fear is to fall prey to a far worse fear. Ahaz has acted as though God is not and Assyria is, and that is a foolish course of action. It is God's presence that must be accounted for in every decision. Because Ahaz is trusting something else in place of God, he will discover God who *is* with us, bringing the very thing he has trusted against him (7:18–19).

Bridging Contexts

The Long view And the short view. These verses speak of the difference between the long view (God's) and the short view (ours). The short view will always plunge us into fear and instability, just as it did Ahaz. Ahaz could only see the immediate danger and therefore thought that he had to find a way out by entrusting himself to what was a much greater danger—Assyria. If he had taken the time to listen to God's perspective on the matter, he would have known that the extreme measures he thought he had to take were in fact unnecessary. Because he refused to do what Isaiah urged him to do (i.e., trust God and look at the situation from God's perspective), he was ruled by fear and made a bad decision. Decisions made out of fear will almost always be bad ones. Decisions that grow out of the calmness borne of explicit trust, however, can be thoughtful and reasoned.

Piety and faith. Ahaz demonstrates a profound truth: Piety is not the same as faith. Piety is the appearance of religion while trust in God is the substance of religion. Ahaz does not have the substance and tries to cover this up with a veneer of appearance. Jesus condemned the Pharisees for the same sin. They tithed and prayed and gave charity to the poor, but it was all a show. They were worshiping themselves being pious. True piety follows as a result of trusting in God. There are certain behaviors that reflect a life given over completely to him. To say we trust God and yet refuse to obey his commands is a contradiction in terms. True, it is possible to have genuine trust in God and lack certain evidences of piety, but it is *not* possible to have genuine piety while lacking genuine trust in God.

On the surface of it, the Immanuel sign seems odd. It was not fulfilled in the short term until several years into the future, and it was not fulfilled in the long term for seven hundred years! We should note that most of the kinds of signs offered by God in the book of Isaiah, and indeed in the Old Testament, were not designed to create faith. That is, they were not some supernatural act that made unbelieving people believe on the spot. Rather, they were typically events occurring in the future that would confirm that the faith exercised in the past was correct.

Faith is always faith. It is a step into the unknown. There will be evidence to support it, but there is never advance proof, so that we may take the step of "faith" with no risk attached. That is not faith.

This was the problem with the religious leaders in Jesus' time. They wanted "signs" that would create faith where there had been none, as they understood the signs of the Exodus to have done. As a matter of fact, the Exodus signs did not create faith; witness the entire generation who had seen the Exodus signs dying in the desert, convicted by the failure of their faith to go up and receive the Promised Land. Signs *confirm* faith; they do not create it. That is why Jesus would only give the "sign" of his resurrection (Matt. 12:39; John 2:19). To those who did not believe previously, the resurrection was merely an embarrassment to be explained away. But for those like the disciples, who had already committed themselves to him, the resurrection was a wonderful confirmation of their faith.

The genuineness of predictive prophecy. One of the issues at stake in the Immanuel prophecy is the genuineness of predictive prophecy. It is an axiom of many modern biblical scholars that Bible writers had no more access to the future than any normally perceptive person has today. This means two things: (1) Writings that claim to predict the future were actually written at the same time or even after the events they claimed to predict, and (2) later writers who saw the fulfillment of prophecy in events in their own times were simply making creative appropriation of ancient writings that actually had no reference to future events.

The biggest problem with this view is that it flies directly in the face of the biblical claims. Some who hold such a belief are at least consistent and admit that the Bible has no revelatory value. But what about those who accept those arguments and yet still say the Bible has authority for the Christian church? What authority? The authority of false claims and misreadings? There is no easy middle ground. I will develop this argument in more detail later in this commentary where Isaiah makes it the lynchpin in his argument for the incomparability of Yahweh (see comments esp. on 43:8–13). Suffice it to say here that if there was no intention to speak of the Messiah in Isaiah 7:14, then Matthew is guilty of misusing evidence in his claim that this proves Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah of the Old Testament. If that is so, much of the New Testament claim for the identity of Jesus must be discarded.

At the same time, we should not push the evidence to say more than it does. To say that Isaiah expected a literal fulfillment of "God with us" in the flesh at some future date is not to say that he had anything like a full understanding of the details of Jesus Christ's life. In fact, apart from what was directly revealed to him, he may have had many incorrect expectations for the Messiah. Thus, to say that the book of Isaiah contains many predictions of the coming Son of David that were given as specific predictions and were legitimately interpreted as such by New Testament writers is not to say that the Old Testament prophets had anything like a complete picture. This is the point of Peter's comment in 1 Peter 1:10–12, that the prophets would have loved to see what the people of the first century A.D. saw.

The idea of God's being "with" people is a prominent one in the Old Testament. From the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:8) to Isaac (26:28) to Joseph (39:2–3) to the tabernacle (Ex. 40:38) to Gideon (Judg. 6:12–13) to David (1 Sam. 18:12, 14) to Asa (2 Chr. 15:9) to Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:7) and to Ezra (Ezra 1:3), the presence of God with his people is the heart of the Old Testament experience. God is not a force or a principle but a person—and a person who wishes to be personally present with his creatures. That presence is protection; it is fulfillment; it is sustenance. When he is not with us, the result is disaster (Num. 14:43). But if he is with us, then life cannot only be endured, it may be triumphed over. But that presence is not only a metaphor; it is a reality. God has taken on himself our flesh, and in that flesh he has taken even our sin into himself. This is why the enfleshed God is to be called "Immanuel"—"God with us."

Contemporary Significance

DECISION-MAKING TIME. We live in a day when good decisions are harder and harder to come by. Thirty years ago the Swedish economist Staffan Linder predicted that as we in the West became more and more productive and therefore had more and more things to consume, time, a fixed commodity that cannot be increased, would become more and more precious. Thus, such time-consuming occupations as relationship-building, romance, child-rearing, and caring for the elderly would have to be radically streamlined, with the latter two being farmed out to the least productive (least expensive) elements in the society. His predictions have proved frighteningly prescient.

Linder made the same observation concerning decision-making. In a society where it is cheaper (less time-consuming) to make something new than to repair something defective, Linder said we would simply make snap decisions and throw away the results of our bad decisions. So we witness the abortion epidemic today. Shall we take a lot of time to get to know one another, and shall we carefully guard our sexuality for the one to whom God guides us? Of course not. That is much too slow. Simply jump into the beds of partner after partner in the hope that one of them will turn out to be Ms. or Mr. Right. Pregnancies? Just throw them away.

Surely there are some decisions that can be made quickly. This is not an argument for paralysis. We can spend so long debating the merits of the alternatives that we never do anything. Rather, this is a plea that we consider the direction of God in our lives as something worth any amount of time we put into it. To do otherwise is to run the risk of deciding for all the wrong motives: self-aggrandizement, fear, passion, or greed.

We need to seek God's Word—something Ahaz did not do. We need to seek it in the Scriptures, in the counsel of godly elders, in the nature of the circumstances, and in our own hearts. What we must avoid at all costs is what Ahaz did, deciding what we want and then asking God if he could not please bless what we want. We need to come to him at the beginning of the process and ask his will with the blankest page possible. When we have the confidence of his word on the subject, we can then go forward with a clean conscience, a courageous heart, and a confident step. If we live in trust in God, even if we do not have a prophet who can tell us exactly what the future holds, we can live in the kind of watchful quietness Isaiah urged

upon Ahaz and thus make decisions that are not emotional knee-jerks but thoughtful and reasoned responses.

Piety and faith. Ahaz demonstrates the real danger of piety without faith. It is to have the form of godliness (2 Tim. 3:5) while missing the substance of the relationship. Piety is the by-product, not the end product. Is going to church good? Is having daily devotions good? Is avoiding lust, greed, and self-indulgence good? Is moderate, inoffensive speech good? Is regular, significant giving to the cause of Christ good? Is integrity in all one's dealings good? The answer to all of these is "of course." But are any of them faith in God? The answer is "no."

In fact, these things can be deadly substitutes for faith in God. If I rely on any of these to give me standing with the eternal, holy God, I am building my house on the sand (Matt. 7:26–27). Faith in God is a radical, soul-encompassing surrender to the love of God demonstrated to us in "God with us"—Immanuel. If we are genuinely walking in such a trust relationship, then we will do all those things listed above. But they will be expressions of the relationship with Immanuel, not substitutes for it, as was the case with Ahaz.

At the same time these kinds of actions are valid fruit of a life in God. If they are not present—that is, if I have no love for worship with the people of God, if my mouth is flippant and coarse, if I am ruled by destructive habits, if I use my money first for myself and toss a crumb to God now and then—observers may justly wonder whether I know God at all. So the two are concomitants of each other. But it is the radical faith that is the root, with piety being only the fruit.

God with us. What does it mean for us today that "God is with us"? This is one of the most profound truths in all of Scripture—profound because of the nature of the biblical God. It was not a big thing in the ancient Near East to say that one of the gods was with someone. After all, the gods were a part of the universal system. Just as the air was "with" them, so were the gods. But the biblical God is not part of the universal system. He stands outside of that system. This was one problem the Greek philosophers wrestled with. If there is such a being, then of necessity that being must be utterly separated from his creatures. He could have nothing to do with them because if he did, they would be affecting him, and that could not be.

The Bible does not solve this problem for us; it simply asserts that it is not a problem. God is absolutely other than we, *but* this supreme, all-powerful, all-good, all-caring One is able to enter into fully personal relationships with each of his creatures. This was true throughout the Old Testament, where to say God was with someone was almost synonymous with saying that person was full of the Spirit of God (see Gen. 39:23; 41:38–39). Evidently the Spirit is the agent through whom we experience the presence of God in our lives.

But with the coming of Christ the reality of God's "withness" has taken on a new dimension. Prior to the Incarnation there was a sense in which God could only be alongside us. Now he is able to be *in* all of us in ways that were limited to a select few in Old Testament times. This is what Jesus had in mind when he said that the Spirit was with the disciples and would be in them (John 14:17). His tabernacle is no longer in the center of the camp but in the human heart itself. This means we can walk without fear. If God is in us through the power of the Holy Spirit, then neither the condemnation of our past sins nor the power of present temptation can defeat us. If God be for us, who can be against us (Ps. 56:9; Rom. 8:31)? Nothing that any earthling can do to us can ultimately hurt us, because Immanuel has conquered death. If God is with us, we can dare to have integrity in our dealings with one another and with the world. There is no loss that can overcome the power of the cross of Christ to redeem it.

"God is with us" would be a great truth even if Christ had not come. But it would only be partial in its hope. There would always be the grave, the single most inescapable reality of human experience, the one reality the immortal God could not share or remove if he is just. But God in Christ has gone with us all the way. He has gone with us all the way into the tomb. And having gone in with us, he can bring us out with him. Immanuel!

Isaiah 8:1–22

THE LORD SAID to me, "Take a large scroll and write on it with an ordinary pen: Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz. ²And I will call in Uriah the priest and Zechariah son of Jeberekiah as reliable witnesses for me."

³Then I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and gave birth to a son. And the LORD said to me, "Name him Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz. ⁴Before the boy knows how to say 'My father' or 'My mother,' the wealth of Damascus and the plunder of Samaria will be carried off by the king of Assyria."

⁵The LORD spoke to me again:

6"Because this people has rejected the gently flowing waters of Shiloah and rejoices over Rezin and the son of Remaliah, ⁷therefore the Lord is about to bring against them the mighty floodwaters of the River the king of Assyria with all his pomp. It will overflow all its channels. run over all its banks ⁸and sweep on into Judah, swirling over it, passing through it and reaching up to the neck. Its outspread wings will cover the breadth of your land, O Immanuel!"

⁹Raise the war cry, you nations, and be shattered!
 Listen, all you distant lands.
 Prepare for battle, and be shattered!

Prepare for battle, and be shattered!

10 Devise your strategy, but it will be thwarted; propose your plan, but it will not stand, for God is with us.

¹¹The LORD spoke to me with his strong hand upon me, warning me not to follow the way of this people. He said:

12"Do not call conspiracy everything that these people call conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it. ¹³The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread, ¹⁴and he will be a sanctuary; but for both houses of Israel he will be a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall. And for the people of Jerusalem he will be a trap and a snare. ¹⁵Many of them will stumble; they will fall and be broken, they will be snared and captured."

¹⁶Bind up the testimony and seal up the law among my disciples.

¹⁷I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob.

I will put my trust in him.

¹⁸Here am I, and the children the LORD has given me. We are signs and symbols in Israel from the LORD Almighty, who dwells on Mount Zion.

¹⁹When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? ²⁰To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. ²¹Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. ²²Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.

Original Meaning

THIS CHAPTER IS a continuation of the Immanuel sign and its implications, introduced in chapter 7. As will be discussed below, there is good reason to think that Isaiah's son Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, who is introduced here, was the first fulfillment of that sign. He represents the negative impact of God's presence that results when both king and people have reckoned without that presence.

The material is presented in two sections. In 8:1–10, the circumstances of the child's birth are given and the significance of his name explained. The second section (8:11–22) deals more specifically with what Isaiah's response to the people's blindness is supposed to be (vv. 11–18) and with the manifestations and outcomes of that blindness (vv. 19–22).

Birth of Child and Significance of Name (8:1–10)

WHILE IT IS not clear what the specific intent of writing on "a large scroll" with "an ordinary pen" is, the general intent seems clear enough, especially in light of the witnesses. Isaiah is to write down the child's name even before he is conceived as an evidence of predictive prophecy. This may be taking place before Isaiah marries the mother of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz.²

Heathen gods cannot tell the future since they are as much imprisoned in time as humans are. But God stands outside of time and can declare what is to happen before it happens.

The language of 8:3 (she conceived and bore a son) is similar to that of 7:14 except for the change in tenses. This suggests that the two verses may be referring to the same event. Furthermore, the nature of the sign is the same as that given in 7:15–17 (she will conceive and bear a son). Before the child reaches a certain age, the two nations Ahaz so much dreads will be helpless to do any harm to Ahaz and his nation. When these are coupled with references to Immanuel in Isa. 8:8 and 10, it seems to me that there is a strong case for identifying Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz with the first fulfillment of the Immanuel sign.

If this is so, the child will not be able to speak clearly before Damascus and Samaria have been plundered. If the encounter between Ahaz and Isaiah occurred sometime in 735 B.C. (see comments on 7:1, 15), this expression of the sign points to the destruction of Damascus in 732 B.C. and the stripping away of almost all Israel's territory outside of the areas of Ephraim and Manasseh, which occurred at about this time. It also appears that both Rezin and Pekah died in 732. Thus, if the sign was given in 735, the child would have been born sometime in 734 and would not be speaking clearly by 732, when the sign was fulfilled.

Isaiah 8:6–10 encapsulates Isaiah's (and God's) perspective on history. The nations come and go at God's command and serve his plan being worked out through his people. God is with Israel; thus, if Israel tries to live as if that were not so, there will be tragic consequences (vv. 6–8). At the same time, the nations must never forget that they are but instruments in the hand of the Holy One of Israel. If they think they can wipe out his people in order to achieve their own geopolitical goals, they are mistaken, because God *is* with his people and will achieve his goals through them, regardless of what any other nation on the face of the earth does (vv. 9–10).

As already noted, this fulfillment of the Immanuel sign has a primarily negative aspect. Because Israel and Judah have rejected the presence of the living God, "quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil." Not only is this true for Syria and Israel but for Judah as well. They have rejected the Lord, the "gently flowing waters of Shiloah" (8:6), in favor of Assyria, "the River" (Euphrates) (8:7). As a result, that river will all but drown them (8:7–8).

The meaning of "rejoices over Rezin and the son of Remaliah" is not clear, since Isaiah 7 speaks of being terribly afraid of these two kings. Perhaps in this context the meaning is that the Judeans are rejoicing over the apparent success of their alliance with Assyria in destroying their two enemy neighbors.

But such rejoicing will be short-lived. Although God's help seems like nothing but a spring while Assyria looks like a great river, that river can quickly "overflow its banks," and the edges ("channels") of its floodwaters will reach to the farthest corners of the land. Of course, this is exactly what happened some thirty years later when the Assyrian king Sennacherib came against Judah (Isa. 36–37). Any alliance with Assyria was like an alliance with Nazi Germany. They were simply waiting for the day when they could take you too, as Stalin learned to his chagrin in 1941.

But whose land is it that Assyria is going to flow over into? Assyria's? No, Immanuel's (8:8). Here the other side of the sign comes out. If failure to take account of God's presence will bring the swift plundering of the land, that cannot change the fact that it is still the land of "God-with-us." Isaiah addresses the implications of this fact in powerful poetic lines in 8:9–10. He changes what we think of as a normal sequence of events and shocks us with it. Why does one "raise the war cry" or "prepare for battle"? To shatter the enemy, of course. But Isaiah says the result will be the shattering of those who have given the cry, of those who made the preparations. Why does one "devise strategy" or "propose [a] plan"? In order to ensure success. But Isaiah says the strategy and the plan will result in failure. Why? Because like Ahaz, the nations have left out one tiny, but huge, factor: "God is with us."

The People's Blindness and Its Consequences (8:11–22)

What is to be Isaiah's response to all of this? How is he to react to the swirling intrigues all around him? Undoubtedly Jerusalem in 735 B.C. was like a pot on the boil. Not only was there a resurgent Assyria to worry about; there was the nearer problem of Syria and Israel. Everybody must have had a theory about what was really going on, and everyone had an opinion about what should be done.

In the middle of this whirlpool, God comes to Isaiah with specific instructions. In the first place, he is not to lose his focus on God. He should

not be swept off his feet with the latest "conspiracy" theory, and he should not fall into the trap of fear. Unlike his contemporaries, he should not be spending time creating fanciful, unfounded explanations of "what is *really* going on," arising out of the terror of uncontrollable events. Instead, he should focus his attention on serving and pleasing the God in whose hands our destinies reside. The attention to "fear" in 8:12–13 is important. The fear of the unknown is a defiling kind of fear, but the "fear of the LORD" is clean (see Ps. 19:9). This phrase describes a way of life that pays primary attention to learning and obeying the ways of the only one who can truly be called "holy" (Isa. 8:13).

God tells Isaiah that if he gets his attention focused properly, God will be a "sanctuary" (8:14) for him. Regardless of what may be happening all around, the one focused on living for God and pleasing him in all things will have a place of security and confidence. The Holy One will provide a holy place ("sanctuary"; Heb. *miqdaš*), where the one who has focused on God will be at peace. But those who refuse to give God that central place in their lives will find that instead of being a rock of refuge, he will be a "stone" in the road to "stumble" over (8:14).

Here we come again to the dual significance of "God is with us." God's presence is the one inescapable fact of human life. We will encounter him in one way or another. Those who make a place for him find him to be the glue that holds everything together. Those who ignore him find their lives to be askew and cannot understand why. They have left out the most crucial factor in the equation of their lives, so that everything will always be unbalanced. The Lord God is either a sanctuary to dwell in or a stone to stumble over. Both Israel and Judah have chosen the latter way. Choosing to pay only ritual attention to God, they are prey to every new fear that comes along. And being prey to their fears, they make all the wrong decisions.

So what should Isaiah do in such a climate? Shall he simply give up in frustration? Or shall he keep hammering away at a people who cannot even understand what he is talking about? The answer is the middle way (8:16–17). He should not give up declaring God's word, but he should do it particularly to disciples who will "bind up" (i.e., treasure) those words for another day when God's face will no longer be hidden from his people. Here Isaiah is a model of the very thing he is calling his people to do. Although he does not see the results he would like to see, still he will be

faithful to God and to his calling, trusting God to fulfill his promises in his own way and time.

It is important here to note the synonymous relation between "wait" and "trust" (8:17) in this book and elsewhere in the Old Testament. True trust always involves an element of waiting. It means believing in results that we cannot see. A determination to have the results I want now is a major sign of an inability to trust.

In 8:19–22 we read what happens when people refuse to trust and obey God. They have God's word given to them in the Torah and the Prophets, yet they refuse to consult it. They prefer instead to consult the dead! They go to "mediums and spiritists," whose bizarre and mysterious mutterings are so much more interesting than the austere commands of God to treat one another in holy ways. The result is "distress and darkness" (8:22), which is hardly surprising. What can the creation tell creatures about the meaning and destiny of life? Only, as the philosopher said, that life is short and brutish. Neither nature ("the earth" [8:22]) nor politics ("the king" [8:21]) nor religion ("their God" [8:21]) will be able to shed any light. They have been trusting all these other things instead of the revealed God, and all of them have failed.

Bridging Contexts

DECEPTION AND FALSE HOPES. Verses 1–10 demonstrate that in this world appearances can be deceptive. Although God's help often seems pitifully small in comparison with what the world seems to offer, we should not be deceived. In the end, what seemed so small is destroying what seemed so great (8:9–10). A recurring truth in this part of the book is that God's weakness is greater than all human strength. Therefore he can be trusted, and we should not be deceived by the ephemeral glory of the nations of earth. It is all passing away, faster than we can imagine.

The section is also about the inevitable failure of false hopes. Humans were made with a capacity for trust. But that capacity was intended to find its ultimate residence in the One who does not change, the One who stands outside of time. If we have learned to do that, we will be able to trust those who are less than God, knowing that they may very well fail us, but knowing that if that should happen, all will not be lost. But when we refuse

to trust God and instead place ultimate trust in creation, we are doomed to disappointment. When we put anything created in the place of God, it *must* fail, because we are asking something of it that it cannot possibly produce.

Focus on God. Humans have an incredible need to explain matters even when we do not have the data to do so. So we create explanations, which usually involve bad motives on the part of the participants. In the process of creating our conspiracy theories, we become so attached to them that even when the correct data emerges, we would rather believe our theories than the facts. Isaiah calls his people—and us—to focus on God and not on our own, usually spurious, explanations of events. We do not have all the data we need to provide adequate explanations. But we do have all the data we need on what it takes to please God. So Isaiah's word is to focus on what we know and leave what we don't know well enough alone.

It is often suggested that "the fear of the LORD" is an Old Testament concept that modern Christians can do without. After all, 1 John 4:18 says that "perfect love drives out fear." In other words, so the reasoning goes, if you fear God, then you must not really love him. But we need to remember that Jesus says almost the same thing as Isaiah: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28). So what is the proper "fear of the LORD"? The fear of the Lord is awe-filled obedience to the Holy One, who has only to look at us to dissolve us but who instead has loved us and given himself for us. It is to put pleasing him before any other concern in our lives, being fully aware that our relationship to him is the *only* factor in life that will determine our destiny.

God will be a force in our lives in one way or another. He will either be a positive force or a negative one. He cannot be avoided. Either he will be the sanctuary we rest in secure from everything the world can throw at us, or he will be the thing we keep stumbling over. When he is left out of life, life does not work right. Relationships do not work. Laughter does not work. Work does not work. Stimulation does not work. This is the point of Genesis 3:16–19. It is not that a cruel God decided to make everything frustrating to Adam and Eve. Rather, life was made to function with God at the center of it. When we take him out and put ourselves at the center, life simply does not work.

Isaiah models an important principle of ministry that Jesus modeled as well. While he did not stop speaking to the masses and to the political leaders, he concentrated his ministry on a few disciples who were able to receive what he was saying and to transmit it faithfully to succeeding generations.⁵ In this way, he had the satisfaction of seeing some success while keeping the claims of God before the nation and seeking any who might wish to join his followers. Modern youth ministry has picked up this model and is using it with success.

Control over the future. The message of 8:19–22 is self-evident. If God is left out of life's equations, then we must resort to other means in order to feel as if we have some control over life's forces. There is a deep need in us to feel we have some knowledge of, and control over, the future. If the creator God of the Bible is rejected, then we will have to consult other means, and often it is the dead who are considered to have both some interest in their descendants and some access to the world of the spirits. But in fact, the dead know nothing, and the result is a deeper darkness of fear and superstition, as the practitioners of these spiritualist cults resort to sleight of hand, mysterious rites, and then spirit-possession in an attempt to hold their clients.

Contemporary Significance

SUPREME POWER. In our own times we have seen ample evidence of the futility of trusting in human glory instead of in God. Who could have believed in 1875 that in just seventy-five years the mighty British Empire would be dismembered and in ruins? It seemed more eternal than God. But the poet Laureate Rudyard Kipling, asked to compose a poem for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, saw that reality clearly and wrote a somber piece fittingly called "Recessional." One of its stanzas says:

Far-called, our navies melt away
On dune and headland sinks the fire;
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!
Judge of the Nations, spare us yet,
Lest we forget—lest we forget!

And the final one says:

For heathen heart that puts her trust
In reeking tube and iron shard—
All valiant dust that builds on dust,
And guarding, calls not Thee to guard—
For frantic boast and foolish word,
Thy mercy on Thy people, Lord!⁶

Kipling saw correctly that it is God who is eternal, not the British Empire. Will any of us in the United States today, supreme in the world and unchallenged in its power, see the same?

More recently, who could have predicted in 1980 that within a decade the mighty Soviet Union that President Reagan so aptly named the "evil empire" would be reduced to a group of small struggling states looking to the West for investment just so they could produce basic needs? Who could have imagined the scene of Western Christian youth handing out Bibles on the streets of Russian cities being almost trampled as people who had been trained as atheists rushed to get a copy? God is still "the gently flowing waters of Shiloah," but those waters are mightier than all the rivers of human dominion.

God at work in history and in our lives. It is interesting to watch the fascination of modern people with so-called "conspiracy theories of history," such as the theories about the assassination of President Kennedy. There are those who seem to know exactly what happened, except that there are others who know it also and know something different. My experience as a college president taught me that many people prefer a twisted explanation of some event to the simple truth.

But Isaiah calls us to give up the fascination with "what really happened." He calls us to believe that God is at work in history and that we can trust him to work all things together for the good of those who are called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28). We need not worry about who really did this or why. This is not to say we should take no interest in current events, but it is to say that we need not be consumed with anxiety over these events and their causes and outcomes. We should focus on pleasing God, and then we can walk in quiet confidence with him.

The fear of God. Today we do not hear much about the fear of the Lord. In a "feel-good" age we want to hear that God loves us no matter what we do and that he will never leave us or forsake us. Both of those sentiments are profoundly true, and without them there would be no gospel for us to proclaim. However, the corollary that is often drawn from these truths is profoundly untrue, namely, that since God's love is unconditional and since he will not forsake us, therefore how we behave is fundamentally unimportant. Of course, we think, we need to try to do our best, but since we will always sin anyway, we need not expect too much of ourselves. How far this thinking is from the perspective of Isaiah. God tells his people to stop worrying about what the Assyrians and the Syrians and the Israelites are going to do and to start worrying about what he is going to do!

This is not just some legalistic Old Testament idea. As noted above, Jesus echoes almost the same words. This is not to say that we should live in shivering terror that God is suddenly going to kill us because he has decided he does not like the way we are acting. Jesus goes on to say that we are worth more to God than the sparrows or the lilies he cares for so prodigally. So what does "fear of the LORD" mean for us? It means we have to reorder our priorities. Instead of asking how we can please ourselves, we must ask how we can please God. Instead of spending all our time worrying about how to take care of ourselves, we ought to be asking how well we are living the life of the One who called us to be holy as he is holy (1 Peter 1:15–16). If we pay attention to this—the main thing—we can trust God to care for us in far better ways than we can ourselves.

Dr. Ben Hayden, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee, tells the story of a businessman whose company built landing craft for the military. A young government inspector let the businessman know that it was standard practice to pay the inspector under the table. The businessman told the inspector, "Son, I can't do that. You see, I fear God, and that's not right." The inspector persisted, pointing out that he would allow the boats to be built much more cheaply than specified if he were paid off. But the businessman also persisted. A few days later the inspector rejected an entire batch of boats, and he told the businessman that either he would be paid or he would destroy the company. The businessman replied, "Son, I fear God, and that means I don't fear you." In the upshot, the company was pushed almost to liquidation but was saved at the last minute by an order for boats from another country, which had come upon some of

the rejected boats at surplus and was impressed by their quality. If we fear God, we do not need to fear anything else.

Thus, God will either be our sanctuary or the stumbling block we keep falling over. This is much like the sun as described in Malachi 4. God will rise on us in the last day like the relentless Middle Eastern sun. But his effect on us will be determined by our condition. It is the same sun, but its heat affects stubble and a flesh wound in two very different ways. It sucks the last drops of moisture out of the stubble and effectively brings its life to an end. But that same sun seems to suck the infection out of the wound and speed its healing and restoration. The sun has not changed, only the conditions of those the sun's rays strike are different. It is the same with us. God does not change. He does not love one and hate another. He loves everyone and does not will that anyone should be lost (Matt. 18:14; 2 Peter 3:9). It is up to us how we experience God. If we focus on him and on living his life in the power of the Holy Spirit, we will find that nothing the world can throw at us need disturb our peace in any final way.

It was an experience of such peace that convinced the Anglican missionary John Wesley, who was on his way to convert Indians in America, that he himself was not converted. He was on board a ship for America when a major storm struck. Wesley was terribly frightened and astounded to discover that some Moravian missionaries on board the ship were continuing a worship and prayer service in total serenity. When he asked them later if they were not afraid, they assured him that they knew their lives were in God's hands and trusted him whatever the outcome. This is reminiscent of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego thousands of years earlier (Dan. 3:16–18). Get God in the right place in our lives and he is an impregnable sanctuary.

But if we do not get him in the right place, it is not simply that we do not have the blessing of his security. Rather, the failure to take account of him in life means that he becomes a genuine hindrance to all we undertake. It is customary in modern culture to lament the absence of God. The play *Waiting for Godot* presents with mind-numbing force the triviality and pointlessness of a life where one is constantly waiting for "Godot" to show up, something "Godot" never does. The playwright, Samuel Beckett, seems to be saying that we should stop this foolish looking for "Godot" and get on with trying to put together the pieces of life without him. But Beckett does

not seem to realize that life is not so simple. It is not that we in the West want God but cannot find him. Rather, we have constructed a model of reality that we think effectively excludes God.

But we cannot exclude the Father from his universe. So we keep stumbling over him as we try to fill the God-shaped vacuum in our souls with possessions, pleasures, diversions, work, and power. In so doing we try to make creation serve us and fill the place of God in our lives. But no created thing can do that. No human relationship can do it. When we demand that someone else give us total allegiance, it does not work. Pleasure cannot do it. When we ask some pleasure to give us total joy, it does not work. Work cannot do it. When we ask work to give us complete fulfillment, it does not work. What are we doing? We are falling over God.

But perhaps someone says, "Hey, it seems to work pretty well for some people, if I believe half of what television depicts." Perhaps, but even when life without God seems to work fairly well, who stands beckoning at the end of the way? It is life's most inescapable reality, Death, and he mocks everything in a world without God. In the end, Death mocks all our attempts to make life work without God (Ps. 73:13–20; Eccl. 9:3). So the choice is ours: Will God be our sanctuary or our stumbling block?

The secret of contentment. Many people in the West today have chosen to make God their stumbling block. We have accepted the dictum of Reason Triumphant that there is nothing in life except the physical and material. Never mind that Reason is speaking outside its competency; we have accepted it. We have attempted to jettison the realities of the spiritual world and to function merely as if we were "naked apes," as one book title has put it.8

But a strange thing has happened to us superior Westerners. We have discovered that incredible physical and material wealth has not made us a happier, more contented people. Instead, we have found something strangely missing. Of course, that something is God. But we have not turned back to that old-fashioned biblical God of our ancestors. No, we have turned to something much more "modern" and "scientific"—the horoscope, the occult, and the mother goddess. Much too educated to believe in miracles, we swallow with alacrity the most amazing hodgepodge of superstition and paganism. Then we are surprised at the rapid increase of spiritual darkness all around us. God has become the stumbling block, and

we are falling all over him. The only question is how far he will have to let us fall before we finally get the picture.

Isaiah 9:1-7

NEVERTHELESS, THERE WILL be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan—

²The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. ³You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. ⁴For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the voke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. ⁵Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. ⁶For to us a child is born. to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, **Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.**

⁷Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

Original Meaning

CHOOSING THEIR OWN way rather than God's way, trusting in human glory rather than in God, the nation has plunged itself into darkness. Instead of having the protective canopy over them and being guided by the pillar of cloud and lighted by the pillar of fire (4:6), they are in confusion and darkness, the prey of the very nations they trust in. But that is not where God intends to leave them. In the very areas where the Assyrian conquests began, there God promises that the light will dawn. The people of Israel have done nothing to deserve this; it is nothing but God's grace.

The Assyrian conquests began in the tribal territory of "Zebulun" and "Naphtali," which extended from the Jezreel Valley northward to the foot of Mount Hermon. A major part of that area is what is known today as the Huleh Valley. The Jordan River flows through this valley before emptying into the Sea of Galilee. Not only was this a lush agricultural area, it was also the place through which the main trade route from Mesopotamia to Egypt ran ("the way of the sea"). Thus, it is easy to see why it was high on the priority list for conquest. But God is greater than Assyria, and he promises that just as these people have experienced the grief and despair of conquest, they will also experience the joy and triumph of victory (9:3–5). As Gideon defeated Midian in the Valley of Jezreel (Judg. 7), so God will defeat Israel's enemies in that same place.

But how will God accomplish this great feat? Through the birth of a child (Isa. 9:6)! For the third time in as many chapters, the birth of a child is filled with great portent. In 7:14 the child's birth was a sign that it was

unnecessary for Judah to trust in Assyria for deliverance from Syria and Israel. In 8:3 the child's birth was a sign of the same thing, but also that the misplaced trust was going to result in disaster for the nation of Judah. Now this birth carries the message another step forward. Out of the disaster God will yet bring final victory. The repetition of birth and the close connection in the meaning of the three signs argues that all three are expressions of Immanuel. Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz was the immediate fulfillment of the sign, and this child is its ultimate fulfillment. God will keep his promises both to Israel and to the house of David (9:7).

But who is this child? The titles given argue forcefully against its being any human, such as Hezekiah. No Israelite or Judean king was ever identified as "Mighty God." Clearly the person being referred to here is the promised Messiah, who will reign over God's people with a kind of justice and righteousness that no mere human descendant of David ever achieved. Furthermore, the government and the social and personal integration ("peace," Heb. *šalom*)⁴ he will produce will be eternal (9:7). This is not Hezekiah or any other merely human son of David.

Bridging Contexts

THIS PASSAGE TEACHES several things about both the character and purpose of God and about the ultimate significance of Immanuel. (1) It teaches initially about God's grace. If God has "humbled" a person or a nation, it is for the final purpose of giving that person or nation "honor" (9:1). He brings us down only because, given our sinfulness, that is the only way he can raise us up. He does not ever wish simply to destroy. In some cases that is the final result, but not because God wishes it to be so. God wants light, joy, abundance, liberty, and cessation of hostility (9:2–5)—not only for his own people but for all people (25:6–9).

(2) This passage also teaches some rather startling things about the nature of the Messiah. We can imagine Isaiah asking God just what the things he has been inspired to say mean. We are told that the Messiah will come as a child. God's answer to the oppression and hostility of this proud and cruel world is not to come as a jack-booted warrior to smash the opposition. Somehow, although we are not told how here, he will shatter "the yoke that burdens" his people without becoming a greater oppressor than the enemy.

(3) We are also told this Messiah will be a son, although we are not told whose son he is. He will be the Mighty God, but he will reign from David's throne. And although David's throne is in Jerusalem, yet his light will dawn in Galilee (cf. Matt. 4:14–16). Nor will these events be of a casual sort, for it will all be accomplished through the passionate involvement ("zeal") in earth's affairs by the transcendent One, the Lord of heaven's armies ("LORD Almighty"). Taken together these various statements seem incapable of resolution. But of course they have been resolved, and we know how.

Contemporary Significance

"God with us" has its foundations, both in theology and as a historical fact, in these verses. If the God who is inescapably present in our lives were a demon or a monster, this affirmation would be one of endless terror. Even if he were only implacably just, his presence would not be a blessing to us unless we were somehow able to live without mistake, error, or sin at all times. But the good news is that the God who is with us is a God who wants to turn our darkness into light, our conflict into *shalom*, our loss into abundance, our despair into joy. The One who rides with passionate desire at the head of the hosts of heaven ("LORD Almighty"; lit., "Yahweh of hosts") has a passionate desire to do good to all people. If a God like that is with us, that is good news to all eternity.

But how can he be with us? If he is transcendent, if he is morally perfect, if he is infinite, if he is eternal, how can he be with us who are created, sinful, finite, and mortal? Surely he can only be with us in a metaphorical way, because the barriers are too great to be crossed. If that is all the phrase can mean, then it is a very hollow one. But this passage sets the stage for the most astounding event in history. The transcendent becomes one of the created; the morally perfect experiences what it is to have sinned; the infinite becomes finite; the immortal experiences mortality. He is with us!

The "child" born of the virgin is the son of David, but he is also the Son of God. The bulk of his ministry was in Galilee, but he was "enthroned" on a cross in Jerusalem. By taking into himself the sin and oppression, the horror and tragedy of this world, he was able to give back righteousness and freedom, hope and fulfillment. In fact, we may argue that it is hard to think

of another way in which the apparent contradictions of Isaiah 9:1–7 could have been resolved than in the way in which they actually were in Jesus Christ. The contemporary significance of this passage of Scripture comes down to this: Have we allowed the Child-King to take over the government of our lives? Only then can we know the benefits of God with us. We cannot have the light, the honor, the joy, the abundance, the integration that he offers in any other way.

Isaiah 9:8-10:4

8THE LORD HAS sent a message against
Jacob;
it will fall on Israel.

9All the people will know it—
Ephraim and the inhabitants of
Samaria—
who say with pride
and arrogance of heart,

10"The bricks have fallen down,
but we will rebuild with dressed stone;
the fig trees have been felled,
but we will replace them with cedars."

11But the LORD has strengthened Rezin's
foes against them
and has spurred their enemies on.

12Arameans from the east and Philistines from the west have devoured Israel with open mouth.

Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised.

13But the people have not returned to him who struck them, nor have they sought the LORD Almighty.

14So the LORD will cut off from Israel both head and tail,both palm branch and reed in a single day;

15the elders and prominent men are the head,

the prophets who teach lies are the tail.

¹⁶Those who guide this people mislead them, and those who are guided are led astray.

¹⁷Therefore the Lord will take no pleasure in the young men, nor will he pity the fatherless and widows,

for everyone is ungodly and wicked, every mouth speaks vileness.

Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised.

18 Surely wickedness burns like a fire; it consumes briers and thorns, it sets the forest thickets ablaze, so that it rolls upward in a column of smoke.

¹⁹By the wrath of the LORD Almighty the land will be scorched and the people will be fuel for the fire; no one will spare his brother.

²⁰On the right they will devour, but still be hungry;

on the left they will eat, but not be satisfied.

Each will feed on the flesh of his own offspring:

²¹Manasseh will feed on Ephraim, and Ephraim on Manasseh; together they will turn against Judah. Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised.

10:1 Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees,
2 to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless.
3 What will you do on the day of reckoning, when disaster comes from afar?
To whom will you run for help?
Where will you leave your riches?
4 Nothing will remain but to cringe among the captives or fall among the slain.

Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised.

Original Meaning

WITH ISAIAH 9:7 the so-called "Book of Immanuel" closes, but the theological reflection on Ahaz's refusal to trust does not. As we saw throughout chapters 1–5, Isaiah keeps calling his hearers back from the beautiful promises of the future to the grimmer realities of the present. So here he is at pains to remind the Judeans that it is not Assyria with whom they must come to terms but the Holy One of Israel. Assyria will not determine Judah's final destiny, but Yahweh will; thus, they must look to their relationship with him.

The prophet addresses this first in 9:8–10:4, where he points out to the Judeans that their trouble is not because of Assyria's greatness but because God's hand of punishment is raised against them. This means that a day will come when Assyria's task is finished, and in that day, in view of Assyria's

overbearing pride, God's hand will be raised against Assyria as well (10:5–34). With God's lordship of history established, the prophet then turns to a discussion of the events at the end of history, the messianic kingdom (11:1–16). This is followed by the beautiful two-part hymn of chapter 12, which closes the subdivision by praising God for his trustworthiness.

Isaiah 9:8–10:4 has four stanzas, each of which closes with the refrain already encountered in 5:25: "Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised." It is not Assyria's anger but Yahweh's that must be dealt with. The four charges God lodges against Israel, as in chapter 1, all have to do with ethical behavior, with the covenant providing the background.

The first charge (9:8–12) is arrogance; instead of humble submission to their covenant Lord, the Israelites attempt to exalt themselves. The result, as in 2:6–4:1, will be humiliation. The second charge (9:13–17) is adulation of great men instead of turning back to the Lord. Thus, the whole nation will suffer. The third charge (9:18–21) is the lack of brotherly love. Having forsaken their covenant Lord, the various tribes attack each other in a bloodbath reminiscent of the final three chapters in the book of Judges. The final charge (10:1–4) describes the social injustice that is inescapable in a society where everyone is looking out for himself or herself alone.

These are the reasons the Assyrians are coming. Change these, and history itself will change. But fail to address these, and even if there might no longer be an Assyria on the scene, God will use another punishment to deal with his people.

Arrogance (9:8–12)

THE FIRST OF the charges is specifically focused on the northern kingdom of Israel. By this time that kingdom is in the final decade of its existence. Yet these Israelites are insisting with the kind of unreality born of desperation that they can still "pull it out." The words of Amos and Hosea calling for repentance, confession, and a humble admission of sin have fallen on deaf ears. So "Rezin's foes" (the Assyrians) as well as Israel's former allies, "the Arameans" (the Syrians), and their perpetual enemies, the Philistines, will all be brought against them by their former covenant Lord, Yahweh.

The phrase "his hand is still upraised" can be understood in one of two ways. It may be a judicial figure of speech, with the judge raising his hand

to pass judgment. But it was common in the ancient Near East (apparently originating in Egypt) to represent the king holding a mace in his raised hand beating down his enemies; this seems the more likely intention here. Israel (and Judah) have become God's enemies (cf. 1:24).

Adulation of Great Men (9:13–17)

WHEN GOD, WHO is the true source of glory, is forsaken, the natural substitute is human leaders. These leaders are praised as those who can somehow achieve superhuman things. Inevitably they fail, for too much is being asked of them. In language reminiscent of chapter 3, God says that he will deprive Israel and Judah of all such false leaders. The same phrase "head and tail palm branch and reed" occurs in 19:15, where it refers to the leadership of Egypt. This may have been a proverbial way of speaking of totality, something like "front to back, top to bottom."

It does not matter who these leaders are, whether they are social, political, or spiritual (9:15); they will all be swept away. As a result of their leadership the land has become so corrupt that no one, neither the strongest ("the young men") nor the weakest ("the fatherless and widows"), will be in a position to claim any special favors from God.

Lack of Brotherly Love (9:18-21)

In this stanza, as in the previous one, there is a sense in which the anger of the Lord speeds along the destruction that a particular sin has set in motion. Here the breakdown of social structure as a result of sin is burning up the land (9:18), and God's righteous judgment adds tinder to the flame (9:19). As the terrific pressure of Assyria's demand for tribute mounts higher and higher, everyone scrambles to save his or her own neck; if that means robbing your neighbor or even your brother, then so be it.

Ultimately, as the final siege begins, the devouring of one's "own offspring" ceases to be metaphorical and becomes a horrible, literal fact (9:20). In a world where self reigns supreme, no one is safe. In the kingdom of northern Israel, the two dominant tribal groups were Ephraim and Manasseh. Here they are shown destroying each other, and in their frenzy of self-destruction, they turn on their brother tribe to the south: Judah (9:21), as Pekah had done (7:1).

Social Injustice (10:1–4)

IN A WORLD characterized by human arrogance, adulation of human leaders, and mutual destruction by the various elements of society, justice becomes a rarer and rarer commodity, with the poor and the helpless being least able to secure it. That is what is described in this final stanza. God's particular anger is reserved for those who consciously use the legal system to oppress the poor and make themselves rich (10:1–2). But God says that all those riches will do no good when the enemy comes. There will not be enough "riches" to deliver them from captivity.

Bridging Contexts

PRIDE. The problem of human pride is a perennial one. It is the deepest and most serious of human sins. It is as much a problem for those with low self-esteem as for those with a superiority complex. In fact, it may be a more serious problem for the former. It is not as much the looking down on others from some lofty height as it is the self-absorption that is passionately concerned to make oneself look good.

That can be seen in the present passage. Israel is in serious trouble. They have lost large areas of their land already. They have experienced significant destruction. But in their concern to look good, they assure themselves and any who will listen that they can "come back." It is pride that prevents people from a realistic assessment of themselves and a humble turning to God for help, strength, and guidance.

Adulation. Isaiah 9:13–17 is about the consequences in political and social life when people do not recognize the lordship of God. They expect the leaders to give them the security and meaning only God can give. Moreover, the leaders believe the adulation the people give them. Thus, the leaders lead for their own position and power, saying what they think the people want to hear ("teach lies") instead of what may be unpopular but necessary for the public good.

Self-interest. A further consequence of refusing to acknowledge God is social breakdown as a result of ravaging self-interest (9:18–21). As individuals put their own self-interests first, they begin to associate those self-interests with their own affinity groups, whether kinship or otherwise. The result is that these groups no longer have a concern for the greatest

good of the people as a whole. Rather, they conceive the good on an evernarrower scale—that which we want. Unable to see anything from a larger divine perspective, they see every other group as a potential threat to be minimized as decisively as possible.

Social injustice. In the end social injustice for personal gain is a self-defeating process. The gains achieved are only temporary, and those who make them will soon be deprived of them. Why? Because God values persons for themselves, not for what they can contribute to someone's financial plan. People are not merely counters on a board, and any attempt to use them in that way is contrary to the reality God has created. To be sure, it may be possible to oppress the weaker or less-fortunate members of society and take advantage of them for many years. After all, the capture of Jerusalem was not to take place for more than 125 years after these words were uttered. Nevertheless, sooner or later, according to this passage, there will be a reckoning.

Contemporary Significance

God's anger, we must avoid several things. (1) We must avoid thinking: "Oh, that's just an Old Testament misunderstanding of things. We know better now. Since Jesus, we know that God is really a God of love." (a) This fails to recognize that when the church affirmed the authority of the Old Testament, it testified that the Old Testament is equally inspired with the New. (b) God's anger and love are found in both Old and New Testaments. Jesus himself became terribly angry on several occasions. (c) If we allow God to be passionately involved with his creation in a positive way and call that "love," we must also allow that the same passionate involvement might express itself in the negative way known as "anger." The two terminologies express two sides of the same phenomenon.

- (2) We must also avoid thinking that whenever we suffer, God must be angry at us. If a drunk driver swerves onto the sidewalk and kills my child, that is not a sign God is angry at me.
- (3) Finally, we should also avoid the idea that the anger of God in the Bible is simply a metaphor for the cause-and-effect nature of existence, similar to the unpleasant consequences we may experience. Take gravity,

for example. Falling is just the way things are. The ground is not angry at you if you step out of a twenty-third-story window and fall to the ground. The problem with reducing God's anger to mere cause and effect in this way is that it removes God from the personal involvement with his creation that is so much at the heart of the biblical experience.

The truth involves some of each of the three positions mentioned above. There is a difference between God's love and his anger. He *is* love, and he *gets* angry. That is, his love is a part of his being. Thus, he is not some tyrant with a hair-trigger temper. The one constant description of God in the Old Testament is that he is full of compassion and slow to get angry (Ex. 34:6; Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:15; etc.). At the same time, he does care *very* deeply about what we do to ourselves, just as any good and responsible father cares about what his children do to themselves. So he *does* get angry when people destroy their own potential and violate the personhood of those around them.

Furthermore, there *is* a sense in which the spiritual world is made just like the physical world. There are certain behaviors that fit in perfectly with the ways in which we are made and will lead to abundance and satisfaction, and there are other behaviors that will lead to destruction. If we choose those ways consciously or unconsciously, there are deadly consequences, not because some arbitrary divine monster has said, "I'm going to get you for that!" but simply because we have violated the terms of our creation.

So, does God get angry? Yes he does, but it is not the selfish anger of a fallen human. Nor is it the temper tantrum of an imperious heavenly monarch who will not permit his lowly subjects to do what they want. It is the heartbroken response of an Artist who watches his artistic creations doing things that are not only a violation of his original dream but are a violation of their very natures.

Self-respect and pride. Where is the line between "decent self-respect" and pride, or between "healthy self-esteem" and self-conceit? The answer is deceptively simple. It all depends on what the "self-respect" or "self-esteem" is based. If it is based on placing ourselves at the center of our world, as modern society recommends, then it is deadly. Such an attitude is nothing other than pride and conceit, because we are trying to make ourselves the basis of our own existence, and that is not possible in this

world God has made. To say "I am somebody important, because I say so" is ridiculous.

As charming as the story "The Little Engine That Could" may be, saying "I think I can, I think I can" does not create the ability to do something. We are not complete in ourselves. Only when we surrender to the love of God and learn that we are worth the life and death of the Prince of Peace will we discover how much we are really worth. Only when we have admitted that in ourselves dwells no good thing (Rom. 7:18) will we be able to know those inner resources that enable us to say, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Phil. 4:13).

A note to leaders. Unless leaders constantly acknowledge their dependence on God, the tendency to the demonic is present. The leaders themselves will believe the adulation that fallen humans will heap on them. Then they will begin to believe that they have a right in themselves to positions of prominence and power. Soon they are governing not for the governed but for themselves. Their actions are tailored as to how best to maintain themselves in power. They are unwilling to take right positions that might be dangerous to their power. Instead, they govern by polls, trying to decide where the people are going and then running to get in front of the crowd. As a result, the leaders "mislead," and those who are "led" are "led astray" (cf. Isa. 9:16).

Love. Jesus' words in John 13:35 do not lose their shocking power. What is the distinctive mark that shows which people are his disciples? Is it sound doctrine, evangelistic fervor, or joyous worship? No, it is none of these. "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." The distinctive sign of discipleship is mutual love. All of the New Testament writers pick this up—Paul ("You yourselves have been taught by God to love each other," 1 Thess. 4:9), John ("Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God," 1 John 4:7), and Peter ("Love the brotherhood of believers," 1 Peter 2:17).

Speaking negatively, Paul sounds a note much like the one here in Isaiah: "If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other" (Gal. 5:15). One of the things legendary about the church of Jesus Christ is "church fights." This is not to say it is never right to have heated disagreements. When heresy is in the air, truth must be contended for. The prophets themselves are evidence of that. But sadly,

most "church fights" have nothing to do with biblical faith. They too frequently have to do with "my way or no way" on some issue relating to style, decoration, or habit. What this betrays all too clearly is an absence of surrender of my will to Christ. To love one another as Christ loved us is to nail my way to the cross for your sake. There is no other way to avoid "biting and devouring" one another.

Social injustice. One of the problems many of us face when we are confronted with the fact of social injustice is that we do not sense any direct involvement in such practices. We are not foreclosing on the mortgage of a widow; we are not requiring an orphan to work for us with no pay; we are not taking payoffs from the lawyer of a crook to deny the claims of a small-time plaintiff. So how do we respond to a passage such as Isaiah 10:1–4?

(1) First, we need to be sure that it is really true that we are not involved in oppression of those more helpless than we. What about my students? As a professor I am in a position of power over them. Am I putting them down in some way for my own convenience? What about help at home? Am I gouging those who work for me on the lawn or in cleaning or in childcare? Or am I generous? What about those I supervise in the office? Do they feel taken advantage of by me? (2) Am I involved in institutions that profit from oppression? When is the minimum wage the wrong wage? (3) Positively, each of us needs to ask what we can do to address injustice where we live. It may be little enough, but it will be something—and that is better than nothing.

Isaiah 10:5-34

⁵"Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of my anger,

in whose hand is the club of my wrath!

⁶I send him against a godless nation, I dispatch him against a people who anger me,

to seize loot and snatch plunder, and to trample them down like mud in the streets.

⁷But this is not what he intends, this is not what he has in mind; his purpose is to destroy, to put an end to many nations.

8'Are not my commanders all kings?' he says.

⁹'Has not Calno fared like Carchemish?

Is not Hamath like Arpad, and Samaria like Damascus?

¹⁰As my hand seized the kingdoms of the idols,

kingdoms whose images excelled those of Jerusalem and Samaria—

11 shall I not deal with Jerusalem and her images

as I dealt with Samaria and her idols?"

¹²When the Lord has finished all his work against Mount Zion and Jerusalem, he will say, "I will punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes. ¹³For he says:

"By the strength of my hand I have done this,

and by my wisdom, because I have understanding.

I removed the boundaries of nations, I plundered their treasures; like a mighty one I subdued their kings.

¹⁴As one reaches into a nest, so my hand reached for the wealth of the nations;

as men gather abandoned eggs, so I gathered all the countries; not one flapped a wing,

or opened its mouth to chirp.""

¹⁵Does the ax raise itself above him who swings it,

or the saw boast against him who uses it?

As if a rod were to wield him who lifts it up,

or a club brandish him who is not wood!

¹⁶Therefore, the Lord, the LORD Almighty,

will send a wasting disease upon his sturdy warriors;

under his pomp a fire will be kindled like a blazing flame.

¹⁷The Light of Israel will become a fire, their Holy One a flame;

in a single day it will burn and consume his thorns and his briers.

¹⁸The splendor of his forests and fertile fields

it will completely destroy, as when a sick man wastes away.

¹⁹And the remaining trees of his forests will be so few that a child could write them down.

20 In that day the remnant of Israel, the survivors of the house of Jacob, will no longer rely on him who struck them down but will truly rely on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel.

²¹A remnant will return, a remnant of Jacob

will return to the Mighty God.

²²Though your people, O Israel, be like the sand by the sea, only a remnant will return.

Destruction has been decreed, overwhelming and righteous.

²³The Lord, the LORD Almighty, will carry out the destruction decreed upon the whole land.

²⁴Therefore, this is what the Lord, the LORD Almighty, says:

"O my people who live in Zion, do not be afraid of the Assyrians, who beat you with a rod and lift up a club against you, as Egypt did.

²⁵Very soon my anger against you will end and my wrath will be directed to their destruction."

²⁶The LORD Almighty will lash them with a whip,

as when he struck down Midian at the rock of Oreb;

and he will raise his staff over the waters, as he did in Egypt.

²⁷In that day their burden will be lifted from your shoulders, their yoke from your neck; the yoke will be broken because you have grown so fat.

²⁸They enter Aiath; they pass through Migron; they store supplies at Micmash.

²⁹They go over the pass, and say, "We will camp overnight at Geba."

Ramah trembles;

Gibeah of Saul flees.

30Cry out, O Daughter of Gallim!Listen, O Laishah!Poor Anathoth!

³¹Madmenah is in flight; the people of Gebim take cover.

32This day they will halt at Nob; they will shake their fist at the mount of the Daughter of Zion, at the hill of Jerusalem.

³³See, the Lord, the LORD Almighty, will lop off the boughs with great power.

The lofty trees will be felled, the tall ones will be brought low.

³⁴He will cut down the forest thickets with an ax;

Lebanon will fall before the Mighty One.

Original Meaning

IF THE PEOPLE of Israel recognize that it is the Lord with whom they must come to terms and not the nations, if they realize that their destiny is determined by their obedience to the covenant and not by their relations to the nations, God will deliver them from the nations among whom he has abandoned them. This point is expressed with colorful force in this section.

Isaiah 10:1–4, the immediately preceding stanza dealing with social injustice, began with the funeral cry, "Woe!" Verse 5 begins with the same word, but now it is directed toward the instrument God had used to punish Israel's and Judah's sins: the nation of Assyria. This is God's way of showing two things. (1) The promised destruction by Assyria is temporary and not permanent. God is not going to wipe out his people, letting Assyria run roughshod over them. (2) Assyria is not operating on its own. It may think so, but it is not. However great the Assyrian power, it operates only under God's sufferance. It only serves God's purposes. Once those purposes have been served, Assyria will be subject to the same moral scrutiny as any other nation. Just because that nation has been God's tool does not mean its people can live without any accountability to their Creator. In fact, they deny such accountability, insisting that they are the product of their own hands. Thus, they are one more expression of the creaturely pride that has such deadly effect on God's creatures (see 2:6–4:1; 13–14).

A Message Against Assyria (10:5–19)

Assyria is the "rod" that is held in God's upraised hand (9:12, 17, 21; 10:4), and it is raised up to punish "a godless nation." As with the charge that Judah and Israel had become God's enemies (1:24–25; 10:3), so this word must have seemed unjust to many. Surely the Assyrians are the ones who are "godless" and perverse. But the fact is, the Israelites have been given the covenant of God, and the Assyrians have not. The people of God know better, yet they pervert their way by turning their backs on the truth revealed to them. The Assyrians would certainly disdain the idea that they are no more than a tool in the hand of the God of the little, despicable nations of Israel and Judah. Their "purpose" (10:7) is not to obey Yahweh but to conquer and "destroy" as many nations as possible. In other words, they recognize no purpose in life but their own will to power.

This idea is expressed in the quotation put in the mouth of the Assyrian king in 10:8–11. The language is reminiscent of 37:10–13. The king has no qualms about saying that he is superior to everything on earth, including all its gods. He is so great that even his "commanders" are the equivalent of the kings of other lands. He is truly the king of kings.

The first four cities mentioned in 10:9 were all fortress cities in northwestern Syria, outposts of "Damascus." But fortresses or not, the tyrant says he has treated them all alike, destroying them. Nor have Damascus and Samaria escaped his grasp. Moreover, since far finer idols than those in Samaria and Jerusalem have not been able to save their lands from the Assyrian king, and since he has in fact already taken Samaria and its gods, why should he think of himself as the lackey of Jerusalem's God? He is superior to that God and will do to Jerusalem whatever he wants.

But as Isaiah points out, the king of Assyria is not superior to Jerusalem's God. Whatever he thinks, he is coming against Jerusalem with only one task: to carry out the "work" God has for him to do "against Mount Zion." When Jerusalem's punishment is complete, at least for the moment, Assyria's punishment will begin (10:12). That punishment will be because of Assyrian "pride," which is expressed in another quotation from their king (10:13–14). The prominence of "hand" seems significant in these two verses. That king does not recognize that he is a tool in the hand of God. Rather, he boasts that it is his "hand" that has captured the nations and their wealth, his "hand" that has looted the nations as though they were nests of "abandoned eggs." No one even dared to flap "a wing" to protest his plundering.

But Assyria is not acting independently, despite their thinking. They are but tools in the hand of Yahweh. There are two figures used in 10:15. The first involves lumbering tools, the "ax" and the "saw," while the second set are tools of warfare or oppression, the "rod" and the "club." God said he would cut down the "forest" of Judah's pride (6:13), and Assyria is the "ax" in God's hand to accomplish that task. God also said that he would punish his people for their sin (5:25), and Assyria is the instrument of that punishment.² But Assyria does not admit that it is not ultimate and thinks, foolishly, that it moves itself.

Because Assyria refuses to recognize the truth, God will turn the tool over to destruction. The "flame" (10:16) of God's holiness, which was once

turned on Israel (6:11–12), will be turned on those who refuse to admit that there might be One superior to them. When Israel turns and recognizes who their true "Light" is, that light will blaze against their enemies and not against them. The metaphors of field and forest are used again to convey the idea of glory destroyed (10:17–19). Not only the least in Assyria ("thorns" and "briers") but also the greatest ("forests and fertile fields") will be consumed—and all "in a single day." This most likely refers to the destruction of the Assyrian army in 701 B.C. (see 37:36–37). When 185,000 died in a single night (note "a wasting disease" in 10:16), Sennacherib had only a "few" soldiers ("trees of his forests," 10:19) left to accompany him on a hasty departure to his homeland.³

A Remnant Will Survive (10:20–23)

"IN THAT DAY" is an expansive term referring to any future time of God's judgment and/or restoration.⁴ Thus, it is not necessary to refer it directly to the events of 701 B.C. nor even to the events of 620–609 B.C., when Assyria was finally destroyed. Rather, here it speaks of that future time when all the punishment at the hands of the nations will be over and the purified "remnant" of God's people (see 4:2–6) will be brought home.

The prophet utilizes the name of his son Shear-Jashub ("only a remnant will return") to do two things here. (1) He wants to assure his hearers that no matter how great Assyria (and later Babylon) may be, they will not be able to destroy God's people. After all, they are only tools in God's hand and can do no more than he gives them permission to. Since God is gracious and compassionate, a remnant will survive.

(2) However, *only* a remnant will survive, and the prophet stresses this with his recurring use of the word "remnant." As is typical of this part of the book, Isaiah is trying hard to guard against false expectations. No one should get so focused on the future survival as to forget the terrible judgment that precedes that survival. Thus, he insists to his hearers that even though the destruction will not be complete, it will be thorough. It has been so "decreed" (10:22).

But the remnant will be different from their predecessors in at least one respect. They will no longer "rely on" (10:20), or trust, their worst enemy before they will trust "the Holy One of Israel." In that coming day when a

handful of survivors return to the land from which they have been exiled, they will learn the lesson of trust that Isaiah 7–39 focuses on.⁵

The Lord's Protection of His People (10:24–34)

In VIEW of the fact that Assyria will be judged and that a remnant of the nation will survive, "therefore" (10:24) the people of Judah should not live in fear of Assyria. Their foreign policy and their spiritual outlook should not be shaped by either the offers or the threats of that great power. When God's purposes for using Assyria are complete, Assyria will disappear from the scene, and the Judeans should make their plans with that fact in mind. As Isaiah earlier said to Ahaz, no emergency action is necessary. While it is difficult to know what "very soon" (10:25) implies in the divine timetable, it is tempting to conclude that this refers to the destruction of the Assyrian army mentioned above and the removal of any serious threat to Judah's existence on the part of the Assyrians.

In 10:26 the prophet turns to two experiences from the past as confirmation of the Lord's power to protect his people from massive threats. Whether it was the multitude of Midianite troops led by Oreb (Judg. 7:25) or Egypt's chariot corps, the finest in the world at the time of the Exodus (Ex. 14:26; 15:4), neither was any match for the power of the "LORD Almighty" (lit., "Yahweh of armies"). Because of that, the heavy "yoke" of oppression that the Assyrian kings used to boast about putting on the necks of conquered peoples will be "broken" off (Isa. 10:27).

One example of such boasting appears in the annals of Sargon II, where he says, "[I] imposed upon them the yoke of Ashur, my lord." There is some question about the proper reading of the last phrase in 10:27, both because the meaning of the Hebrew is obscure and the versions have a number of different readings. If the Hebrew is correct, then the idea is that the ox is so well fed that its neck becomes so fat it breaks the bow that holds the yoke in place.

Verses 28–34 have occasioned a great deal of scholarly discussion, primarily over whether they describe a literal historical event. Those who believe there were two attacks by Sennacherib on Jerusalem suggest that this may describe the route taken by the Assyrian army when it attacked Jerusalem a second time (about 687 B.C.). However, the "two-attack theory" is only a theory, for there is no evidence to support it. Furthermore, it is

hard to imagine a major army actually using the route described here. It is not the main route and would be difficult for a small troop to navigate, let alone a large one. Thus, it seems better to understand this material as another of Isaiah's word pictures.⁹

"Aiath," the first village mentioned, is about fifteen miles north of Jerusalem, and "Nob" is on the slopes of Mount Scopus, overlooking Jerusalem on the north. The route described diverges from the normal one that begins to the north of Jerusalem and travels instead down the east side of the ridge line. Probably the reason for this is to express the almost unstoppable approach of the enemy army. It does not matter that the route is rugged and filled with obstacles—on they come! In less than two days they have traversed the rugged terrain and are shaking their fists at the apparently doomed city. This is a metaphor for Assyria. On they have come year after year. Nothing can stop them. Judah must come to terms with them or be destroyed.

But Isaiah tells his hearers they should look at another reality. For at the moment when the Assyrian ax believes it will topple the Judean tree, Judah's God turns the ax upon the ax! In a moment a forest as mighty as that covering the Lebanon mountains falls to the ground. Human pride cannot stand before the true "Mighty One" ('addir; note the similar 'abbir, "a mighty one," in 10:13, which is what the Assyrian king called himself). The true Mighty One is the One whom Judah should be relying on, not on the ax in the Mighty One's hand.

Bridging Contexts

VERSES 5–19. These verses are about the lordship of God over history and the need to keep a true perspective. This is more difficult in the modern setting when we do not have inspired prophets who can tell us exactly what each entity of history is about, but the central message is no less true. No nation stands on its own. Every nation is subject to God, and every nation is serving God's ultimate purposes.

This has implications for the nations: Whenever a nation begins to believe it is superior to God and can do what it wishes, we may be sure that nation's end is soon to come. But it also has implications for individual believers. We should neither be paralyzed by the nations in their power and

glory, nor should we put any ultimate degree of trust in them. God is supreme over the nations, and he is the One we should fear and the One in whom we should trust.

This section also describes the nature of human pride. The Assyrian king makes no appeal here to his gods as he makes his claims. He feels he is superior to the gods of all his enemies. In the end pagan religion exists to serve human needs. This means that while lip service may be given to the gods, in fact what is supreme is the human ego. It is this that must be preserved at all costs, and at the bottom of everything the gods are only devices created to serve the ego. If one set of gods does not accomplish what is needed, it can easily be discarded and a new set put in place. The repetition of the first-person pronouns in these verses underlines this point —no less than thirteen occurrences here. So the question arises: Am I at the center of my world, or is there some other center?

Finally, we must be careful not to take credit for what God has done through us. It was this sin that kept Moses out of the Promised Land (Num. 20:12): "Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them." What had Moses done? It was not merely a matter of striking the rock instead of speaking to it. He had led the Hebrews to believe that he had the power in himself and his magic staff to produce water for them: "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" (20:10). Instead of making it clear that God alone is the Holy One whose transcendent power and endless love supply all human needs, the ax pretended it could swing itself. If this Moses had led the people into the Promised Land dry-shod across the Jordan, they would have been worshiping him inside of a year. God had no choice but to keep him from entering.

Verses 20–23. Keeping both emphases of hope and judgment before our eyes is difficult. Isaiah's constant attempt to keep the two in balance is a reminder of this. If the only word heard is judgment, people tend to lose heart and give up. But if the only word they hear is certain hope, there is a strong tendency to "let up" in the matters of daily obedience and accountability. So, while the body of this poetic stanza relates to the certainty of a remnant returning, the prophet is at pains to remind his readers that *only* a remnant will return, and this will not preclude judgment

but will follow it. As Peter says, judgment begins with the household of God (1 Peter 4:17).

A second important point in this stanza is the idea of "the remnant." From Genesis on, the Scriptures portray the concept of a handful maintaining the faith while the masses go to perdition. It is explicit with the family of Noah in the Flood and implicit with the family of Abraham following the Tower of Babel. It is explicit with Sodom and Gomorrah, and while the number of those entering the Promised Land is as great as the number of those who left Egypt, it could have reasonably been expected to be a good deal greater, given geometric progression. In fact, the second generation is a remnant. Again and again throughout the history of Israel, the continuation of the faith seems to hang by a shoestring, such as the boy Samuel when the priesthood was deeply corrupted, or the boy David when the entire army of Israel was cowed before the giant. In other words, despite the fact that biblical faith is a community faith, it is not a mass faith. That is, faithfulness always is intentional and accountable, and that often comes down to a handful.

Another point that should not be overlooked is the issue of trust. Why do we tend to put our trust in the wrong things, as Judah did in Assyria? Surely the answer in that situation was that it seemed the only thing to do. The situation was desperate. Israel and Syria were on the march and might even be minded to do away with the Davidic dynasty. Something had to be done. Furthermore, Assyria loomed in the background and would eventually have to be faced. Perhaps a direct approach would curry favor with the monster and also dispose of the two vicious neighbors. Trust God? That always seems so intangible. But more than that, it always starts with the surrender of my ability to take care of things in my way for myself. There is the sticking point: surrender. We do not want to give up our own way and our own estimation of what we really need.

Verses 24–34. Two points need emphasis here. The first is the importance of memory. Isaiah reminds the people of two of the great deliverances they had experienced in the past: Egypt and Midian (vv. 24, 26). The lesson is plain: If God could deliver from those mighty powers, he can deliver from Assyria as well. God wants us to learn certain principles from the past that have universal implications. That is different from the pagan approach to the past, which is focused on the now, and the past is

used primarily in a ritualistic way. That is, if one does all the same things now, then all the good things that happened then will be repeated. That is not the biblical way. God rarely does the same thing twice. But there are principles we can learn from the past that may be applied to new situations where the same kinds of issues are in play. That is what Isaiah is calling for: new choices made in the light of old truths.

The second truth is that human power is no match for divine power. Again, this calls for a perspective beyond now. It is one thing to assert that God is greater than any human nation, but it is another actually to be able to base one's behavior on such an idea. To do that we must be able to draw on evidence from the past as well as on our own personal experiences. Here Isaiah is saying that his own experience of the greatness and goodness of God confirms his belief that God will not allow the arrogance of any human nation to stand, especially when that arrogance leads such a nation to believe it can destroy others with impunity. There is a bar of judgment above even the greatest of nations, and every nation would do well to remember that fact.

Contemporary Significance

God's lordship over the nations today, we naturally think of the way in which he has humbled the Russian empire in the last ten years. Marx's famous line, "Religion is the opiate of the people," has come back to haunt his successors who built their whole regime on the official attempt to remove the very idea of God from life. The result is, as one Russian official put it to a friend of mine, "We have stared into the very face of evil, and it has seared our minds." Any nation that attempts to put itself in the place of God cannot survive.

But there is an earlier example in the lifetime of many of us that must not be overlooked. That is Nazi Germany. The parallel to what Isaiah is talking about here is startling enough that many do not like to bring it up. But the fact is that the Holocaust¹¹ may well be seen as a modern parallel to the Exile. Then, as now, a mighty power set itself to destroy the people of God. In the case of Assyria and Babylon, they were allowed to succeed to the extent they did only because God permitted it as a source of discipline and

punishment for the unbelief of those people. May this perhaps be the case with Nazi Germany? Yet if Germany was a tool in the hand of God, it certainly did not see itself as such. Like Babylon and Assyria, it saw itself as supreme in itself, with the power and therefore the right to destroy whomever it wished. But like Assyria and Babylon, Germany was terribly destroyed, and God's Jewish people not only survived but prospered. No nation can set itself up as superior to God and survive.

Will the United States learn this lesson? What is it that God wants to do through us in the world today? Will we make any serious attempt to discover that? And if we do, will we carry out our tasks in humility, recognizing the terrible risks of pride? The history of nations in the Christian West is not encouraging in this respect. One after another has come to power proclaiming its dependence on God, and one after another has exited the scene in disgrace, having come to believe that they were ultimate in themselves.

What will Christians learn from this? Surely we should learn that no nation is God. It may be a tool in the hand of God, but it is only a tool. As soon as it begins to arrogate his place, it is marked for destruction. Thus, we may love our nation and be grateful for it, but the idea of "my nation, right or wrong" can never be ours.

Pride is the ultimate enemy, both of nations and of individuals. The tendency is to focus on ourselves as both the source and end of our lives. This is what Paul talks about in Romans 1:21: "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him." Having put ourselves in the place of God, we then create a religious system to support such a reversal of reality. The end is the worship of the creation as an act of self-worship. God is made in our image and can be changed as necessary to support that image. This is why secularism has such appeal today. It seems to relieve us of any need to go outside of ourselves for an object of worship. But this is also the ultimate downfall of secularism: We *must* worship something outside of ourselves to give ourselves any sense of significance. Thus, having already rejected a God who calls for surrender, the modern descent into the occult is wholly predictable.

It is remarkably easy to take credit for God's actions in one's life. As just noted, all we have to do to begin the slide into eventual paganism is to live without a continually thankful attitude. This is a problem both for those

who are successful and for those who are not. Those who are successful come to take their abilities and achievements for granted. Perhaps this is what happened to Moses. He was used to succeeding in moments of crisis and may have come unconsciously to believe that his powers were his own. He forgot that he was only a tool in the hand of God. He forgot to cultivate a thankful attitude.

The same is even more true for those who do not see themselves as successes. Why give thanks for failure? But the fact is, all of us are tools for God's service, whether we see the results or not. So, when we pray for something and it occurs, it is easy to say, "Well, I had that coming," and in so doing give the impression that it was something we earned and deserved instead of its being an evidence of God at work through us.

The security of the believer. One of the great issues in the evangelical church is the security of the believer. Churches that have been more influenced by Calvinist theology tend to preach "eternal security" even when they have rejected Calvin's previous four points, which led to that teaching as a logical necessity. All too often holy living is neglected because heaven is certain. By contrast, churches that have been more influenced by Arminius have tended to preach a kind of "eternal insecurity," in which a believer's eternal state depends on whether or not the most recent sin has been confessed. Their tendency is to focus on one's behavior rather than on one's relationship to the Savior.

These issues seem to be the very ones underlying a passage such as this one. On the one hand, Isaiah is intent on assuring the people that the future of the nation is secure. Israel will survive; the Mesopotamians will not be able to achieve their murderous desires. That means the people can live confidently. They do not need to surrender their trust in God in order to secure the outcome. Nevertheless, that confidence in the future must never be allowed to make them think their present behavior will not have consequences. That the future of the nation is secure does not mean individual Israelites can sin with impunity.

This has two implications. (1) The first has to do with the church. The church will survive. It is the bride of Christ, and Christians need have no fears on that score. As someone has said, "I've read the last chapter in the Book! We win!" But that does not mean that every individual associated with the church is thereby guaranteed a place in heaven. Unless we live

lives that show that we are truly "remaining" (KJV "abiding") in Christ, we will be thrown into the fire and burned (John 15:5–6).

(2) But there are also implications for the individual. If we have entered into a personal relationship with Christ, we can know that we will be kept by him (John 10:28–29). We need not live in a constant state of anxiety as if the continuation of that relationship depends on our performance. It does not; it depends on our continued faith, and he will make that continued faith possible. But the danger comes in our conception of faith. For many, belief in Christ is primarily assent to a certain set of ideas. That is, it is a kind of mental gymnastics. But that is not true. Faith in Christ is primarily a way of living. If I think that I can live a life where I and my desires and my way are the central focus and still expect to have eternal life merely because at a junior high retreat somewhere I accepted Christ, and I go to church somewhat regularly now, I am not merely deluded, I am lost. If the apostle Paul had to say, "No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (1 Cor. 9:27), none of us can live as though personal holiness is only a position and not a reality.

The remnant. The concept of the remnant tends to go in and out of fashion, depending on the state of the church at a given time. When the church has been strong and moving forward, the emphasis has tended to be on the idea of participating in the coming kingdom of God. But when the church has felt persecuted and was in a state of little or no growth, the "remnant" theology has tended to be more popular. Some of both emphases are probably needed in every time. In a time of growth and seeming power, we need to ask whether we are producing more chaff than wheat and whether there is fruit here that will stand a blasting drought. At the same time, when the situation is difficult, the "remnant" must remember that they are the representatives of a kingdom that cannot fail.

There are two great dangers in a "remnant mentality," closely related to each other. (1) One may be called "ghetto-ization." That is, those who believe themselves to be the righteous remnant will withdraw into a protective cocoon secure in their own righteousness and so cease to have the effect of salt and light in the world that Jesus commanded us to have (Matt. 5:13–16). (2) The other danger is self-pity. Here we take on a kind of "hang-dog" mentality, where we are always feeling sorry for ourselves as

the last vestiges of whatever God is trying to do. But if we are secure in the promises of God and rely on God and not on human power, our own or that of the state, we can dare to live in the open with quiet confidence and humble joy.

Believers in the former Eastern bloc countries are shining examples of this truth. While they did not go out of their way to provoke confrontation, neither did they avoid it. They lived their lives before God, seeking to love everyone, even those who counted themselves their enemies. The state tried to isolate them, but it never truly succeeded. They were truly the remnant, yet many of them did not succumb to a remnant mentality.

Memory. The place of memory in the Bible is important. This is partly so because of the importance given to human history in the Bible. Alone of all the world's holy books, the Bible declares that God has made himself known in ongoing human relationships. Therefore, it was of utmost importance to record the details of those relationships with honesty and accuracy and to record the inspired interpretations of the meaning of those relationships. This is why words associated with memory are so important in a book such as Deuteronomy (e.g., Deut. 4:10; 5:15; 7:18). God had done some things in Israel's experience that demonstrated the central truths of human (and divine) existence. He did not reveal himself in disembodied aphorisms but in the raw stuff of daily life. He did not only say that he was dependable; he showed it. In fact, he showed it before he said it (as in the Abraham narrative). Therefore, when God called his people to believe in him, there was evidence in life to support that call.

The same must be true for us. If we are to keep the faith in times of stress, difficulty, and perhaps real persecution, there must be a solid block of memory in our minds. First, we must remember sacred history. It is not accidental that we teach our children "Bible stories." God has once for all intercepted human life and given us the final word on how we are to interpret our own lives in that regard. As the Israelites did, we are to remember the Exodus and the Conquest and the tragedy of the judges. Those events are our history too. Beyond this we can also remember the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord and the stirring narrative of the founding of the church.

Then there is our personal history. We dare not succumb to a kind of spiritual Alzheimer's disease. We need to recount to ourselves and our

families the ways God has intervened in, provided for, guided, and sustained our lives. When our spiritual memory is intact, so is our spiritual identity. With a secure spiritual self-identity, we can look with perfect confidence at the various Assyrias that cross our paths, able to learn whatever lessons of discipline or correction God wants for us, but also able to see their certain doom in the end.

In the 1970s Joseph Tson, a Romanian pastor, heard a Voice of America broadcast enumerating all of the failed promises of Marxism, and he immediately thought of all the promises of the Christian faith that have come true. He has said that in that moment he knew Communism could not survive and that he and other Christians should begin preparing for the day of its collapse. We might marvel at such vision, but the fact is, Tson was a man with a memory, and because of that memory, he could see the future when others could not.

Isaiah 11:1–16

- ¹A SHOOT WILL come up from the stump of Jesse;
 - from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
- ²The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
 - the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD—
- ³and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.
- He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
 - or decide by what he hears with his ears;
- ⁴but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
 - with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
- He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
 - with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
- ⁵Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.
- ⁶The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat,
- the calf and the lion and the yearling together;

and a little child will lead them.

The cow will feed with the bear,

their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

⁸The infant will play near the hole of the cobra,

and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest.

 They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,
 for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

¹⁰In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious. ¹¹In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the remnant that is left of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the sea.

12He will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel; he will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth.
13Ephraim's jealousy will vanish, and Judah's enemies will be cut off; Ephraim will not be jealous of Judah, nor Judah hostile toward Ephraim.
14They will swoop down on the slopes of Philistia to the west; together they will plunder the people to the east.

They will lay hands on Edom and Moab,

and the Ammonites will be subject to them.

15The LORD will dry up the gulf of the Egyptian sea; with a scorching wind he will sweep his hand over the Euphrates River.

He will break it up into seven streams so that men can cross over in sandals.

16There will be a highway for the remnant of his people that is left from Assyria, as there was for Israel when they came up from Egypt.

Original Meaning

HERE COMES THE final evidence of God's trustworthiness. Although the house of David in the person of Ahaz has failed to trust the Lord in the crisis brought on by Israel's and Syria's attack and has thus brought disaster on the nation of Judah, God will not allow that disaster to be his final word. Instead, as promised briefly in 9:1–7, he will one day bring a true descendant of the house of Jesse to rule over his people. Instead of the cowardly shepherd who depends on force to secure his kingdom, this One, filled with the Spirit of God, will rule with fairness and justice and will bring about true *šalom*.

The Coming Descendant of Jesse (11:1–9)

WHY IS THE MESSIAH here attributed to the family line of Jesse and not more directly to that of Jesse's son David? Perhaps the point is that this new David will spring up as a new beginning, just as the first one did. Or perhaps it is intended to point beyond royal Jerusalem to the humble origins of the dynasty in Bethlehem. At any rate it serves to underline a certain discontinuity with the present representatives of the house of David. The One who is coming will not be merely one more descendant of the royal

line that is now so thoroughly besmirched; rather, he will spring from the very roots of that dynasty.

The forestry imagery that has played such a prominent role in these early chapters continues here. The prophet sees the forest of Israel's pride having been thoroughly cut down and burned, as prophesied in chapter 6. In its place grew up the mighty forest of Assyria. But now that forest too has been cut down (as ch. 10 predicted). In this field of burned-out stumps, as suggested in 6:13, a green "shoot" is springing up from one of the stumps. It is a "branch" coming from the original "root." Although the tree of Davidic pride has been cut down and burned, there is still life in the original root, a life that resides finally in the faithfulness of God (cf. 2 Sam. 7).

This descendant of Jesse will rule with a different spirit than that which characterized too many of the previous descendants. It will be the Spirit of the Lord. Throughout the Old Testament when someone is marked by a different kind of ability and motivation than what normally characterizes humans, this is the language that is used. It extends from Joseph (Gen. 41:38) through Bezalel (Ex. 31:3) and Othniel (Judg. 3:10) and David (1 Sam. 16:13) to Micah (Mic. 3:8) and the other prophets. The Spirit of the Lord is the means by which God's people will be able finally to keep their covenant with God (Ezek. 36:27). Thus, the Messiah will not rule in the power and the motivation of the fallen human spirit but by the life and breath of God himself.

As a result, his reign will be characterized by "wisdom," "understanding," "counsel," "power," "knowledge," and "the fear of the LORD"—all the characteristics lacking among God's people (Isa. 1:3) but found wherever God is truly present (Prov. 9:10; Isa. 33:6). This kind of true understanding will not be an intellectual grasp of certain facts but that kind of wisdom that springs from an experiential knowledge of the One who is true. The repetition of "the fear of the LORD" in Isa. 11:2–3 underlines this point. The problem with too many of the Davidic monarchs who ruled Judah and all of the kings of Israel is that they did not rule out of a chief concern for obeying, pleasing, and glorifying God, which is what this phrase means. Instead, the chief concern of too many was with maintaining their own power. This ruler will be different.

How different he will be becomes clear in 11:3–5. He will not "judge" on the basis of appearances or of image. He will not "decide" on the basis of

what the outcome of the case might mean to him. He will not be biased in favor of the rich and powerful. Instead, he will concern himself with what is right according to the unchanging standards of the One who is Right. The "justice" he dispenses will connect with the regulations for life designed by the Creator. As a result the "poor" and the "needy" will no longer be at a disadvantage with the rich. Nor will the powerful escape if they are among the "wicked." His words will be more powerful than the mightiest "rod" some other king might brandish to try to enforce his will, and the "breath" (rua, "spirit") of his lips will not only pronounce the sentence of the "wicked" but actually kill them.

How will all this be possible? Because "righteousness" and "faithfulness" will be at the very heart of this person's existence. The English translations tend to obscure the imagery used in 11:5, but the sense is that these characteristics are the Messiah's most intimate garments, his underclothing. When you strip away everything else, what do you find? A continuing concern to be right with all that is right and to be true to all that is true in God's universe. Can such a king be trusted? Will he have an inescapable personal authority? By all means!

The result of this kind of leadership will be peace—not merely the cessation of hostilities but the unification of that which was formerly divided. The imagery used to convey this point in 11:6–9 has captured thinkers and artists across the centuries. Isaiah depicts the very opposites of aggressiveness and helplessness living together in harmony. Wolves, leopards, lions, and bears are together with lambs, goats, calves, and cows. Perhaps the most shocking image of all is the one of a baby playing in a nest of deadly snakes.

Should these images be taken literally? Many have believed so and have seen these things to be characteristic of the millennial reign of the Messiah predicted in Revelation 20:1–6. If so, it will truly be a new heaven and new earth (see Isa. 65:17), for a lion as now constituted can neither chew nor digest "straw like the ox" (11:7). Others have argued that this imagery speaks of an equally dramatic change in human nature, where the aggressiveness and cruelty that are so much a part of us will be forever changed (11:9). This latter change has already been effected in part, and we may look forward with joy to its final fulfillment. The means by which this

will be accomplished is cited in the final colon of 11:9: "The earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea."

In this verse we return to the opening theme of 11:2, true knowledge. The Israel that was too stupid to know where the barn was, spiritually speaking (1:2–3), will now have true knowledge of reality and will be able to act accordingly. The Hebrew language does not recognize any distinction between knowledge that is an accumulation of information and knowledge that is personal acquaintance. For the Hebrews, all true knowledge is based on experience. Therefore, when the prophet speaks here about "knowledge of the LORD," he is not speaking primarily of knowledge *about* the Lord but of insight into reality born of a close and intimate relationship with him. The Messiah will make it possible for all people to know God intimately.⁶

The Messiah As the Banner (11:10–16)

As God previously ran up a "banner" (5:26) to call the enemy nations to come and destroy his people, now the Messiah is a "banner" (11:10, 12) calling the nations to himself (see 2:1–5), with the express purpose of restoring his people to their homeland. The places cited in 11:11 emphasize the worldwide nature of this return. They will come from the far south ("Cush"), the far east ("Elam"), the far north ("Assyria"), and the far west ("the islands of the sea"). The phrase "the four quarters of the earth" in 11:12 expresses the same idea. There is no part of the earth too far away for God's "hand" to reach.⁷

The precise intent of "a second time" in 11:11 is not clear. Perhaps the first time was the Exodus from Egypt, so that the return from the Exile constitutes a kind of second Exodus. But the worldwide extent of the Dispersion was greater than anything that happened between 722 and 586 B.C., and the return in 538 B.C. was only from Babylon and not from these other lands. This invites us to consider that the "second time" may point to a second return from exile. The fact that this return from the nations figures again in chapters 60–61, which seem to be addressed to people after the return in 538 B.C., adds support to this understanding.

This part of the book (Isa. 7–12) started with the hostility of the northern kingdom (here identified by the primary tribe of that area, "Ephraim" [11:13]) toward Judah. Now the prophet envisions a day when that hostility, stretching back to the division after Solomon's death and even further (see 2

Sam. 2:1–11), will be permanently healed. The division between Samaria and Judea at the time of Christ was one continuation of that hostility. When Christ drew some of the Samaritans to himself (John 4), he was beginning to bridge the gulf; we await the final bridging to occur when Christ's kingdom is fully realized.

Instead of fighting among themselves, the unified people of Israel will be able to mount an effective offense against the historically hostile nations on the east side of the Jordan: Ammon to the north, Moab in the center, and Edom to the south (Isa. 11:14). No longer will these peoples be able to attack the Israelite people at will.

Again in 11:15 it is unclear how literally the prophet intends these figures to be taken, but the point is clear. There will be no effective barrier to the return of his people either from the south ("the gulf of the Egyptian Sea," i.e., the gulf of Suez) or from the north ("the Euphrates River"). In language reminiscent of the Exodus, Isaiah speaks of a wind drying up the waters (cf. Ex. 14:21) and of crossing a riverbed dry-shod (cf. Josh. 3:17). Isaiah 11:16 continues the imagery of ease of travel with the first use of the motif of "highway" in this book. Here the allusion to the Exodus becomes explicit, and it is clear that symbolism is intended since there was no literal highway through the desert for the people of the Exodus.

Bridging Contexts

VERSES 1–9. These verses are speaking of the characteristics of the kingdom of God. God keeps his promises, although not always in the way we might envision him doing so. The Jews of the New Testament era were certain that the promises of a descendant of David ruling over Israel meant that a literal political/military leader would rule over them and defeat their political/military enemies. Thus, when God kept his promise in another way, they had a difficult time making the changeover. We might say that they should have been prepared for a more spiritual emphasis in the messianic kingdom if we look at the type of language used here and elsewhere. However, we cannot be too hard on them, especially since they viewed themselves as the "poor" (11:4) whom the Messiah would vindicate when he destroyed the "wicked" (11:4), their oppressors, with fire from his mouth.

But it is instructive to modern-day readers, who should read prophecy with a bit more humility and a bit less certitude that they know exactly how the predictions are going to be fulfilled. In particular we need to read prophecies like this with more of an eye on their spiritual teaching and less on the mechanics of their fulfillment. Thus, this passage speaks about the basis of true knowledge in the fear of the Lord, about the power of the Word of God, and about the hope for the healing of humanity's aggressive and oppressive instincts.

Verses 10–16. This prophecy of the return of God's people to their land perhaps speaks to the opposite tendency of that just mentioned. If we need to be careful not to interpret predictions overly literally, we need also to leave a place for literal fulfillment. For centuries the church understood itself to be the spiritual successor to the people of Israel and saw all the promises as having a spiritual fulfillment in the life of the church. Thus, when Jews began to return to Israel in the last part of the nineteenth century and that return became a flood after World War II, many Christians were taken by surprise. Again, it is too easy to say they should not have been surprised, given Paul's rather clear statement in Romans 9–11 about the old stock not having been rejected. It is always much easier to see where we have been than where we are going. So, bald assertions that a certain passage can *only* have spiritual significance ought to be held suspect.

Contemporary Significance

A MILLENNIAL KINGDOM. It seems plain to me that just as there will be a literal return of Christ, there will also be a literal new heaven and new earth over which Christ will reign; it is to that kingdom that this chapter is looking forward. Apart from the explicit biblical statements, I believe the logic of creation calls for a time when God's creatures will experience creation as it was meant to be. Whether that reign will be a literal thousand years, as Revelation 20:1–5 has it, I am much less certain. The reason for that uncertainty is that the round number "thousand" is only exceeded in Hebrew numerology by "ten thousand" as a really large number (cf. 1 Sam. 18:7). We today might talk of "millions" and "billions," respectively. So this reign of Christ will be for a very long time until the creation is brought to its logical fulfillment.

That the church is going to bring in the kingdom described here even symbolically seems less and less likely. If it may be argued that the Christian "kingdoms" have been somewhat more enlightened and humanitarian than the non-Christian ones, it is still true that the two great blots on human history, World Wars I and II, were either centered in, or had their origins in, Christian Europe. Too often human aggression and oppression have been justified in terms of the Christian Bible. So we look to a day yet to be when "they will neither hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain" (Isa. 11:9), and we look to a power not our own to bring that to pass.

The present kingdom. At the same time, this is not an excuse for Christians to sit on their hands and wait for *deus ex machina* to come and deliver us from this mess. Clearly Christ's kingdom has both come and is yet to come. In the sense I have just been speaking of, it is yet to come. But in another sense it has come. The Holy Spirit is available in his fullness to every believer, and he will enable us to know God in a way that changes our individual behavior. That the sinful nature in humanity has proven much more intractable than the church has believed in its more optimistic moments does not justify each of us avoiding full participation in all that Christ died to make available to us.

We can know God in ways that will forever change our thinking and acting, and that change can affect our communities in positive ways. We can participate with Christ as he seeks to bring right to the needy and justice to the poor. We can surrender our "rights" to him and thus any need to aggressively claim what is ours for ourselves, knowing he will supply our needs better than we ever can ourselves (Eph. 3:20–21; Phil. 4:19).

In our own times we have seen the beginning of the fulfillment of the promises of this chapter as the Jewish people have been gathered into Israel from all over the world. Furthermore, it is interesting that the kingdom of Jordan, which encompasses ancient Ammon, Moab, and Edom, is at peace with Israel. To be sure, most modern Israelis give God no credit for their return, which is a dangerous position for them to be in. However, it is obvious that God is not finished with his plans for his people, and we may look forward with excitement to see exactly how he will fulfill his promises.

Isaiah 12:1-6

IN THAT DAY you will say:

"I will praise you, O LORD.
Although you were angry with me,
your anger has turned away
and you have comforted me.

2Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust and not be afraid.
The LORD, the LORD, is my strength and
my song;
he has become my salvation."

3With joy you will draw water
from the wells of salvation.

⁴In that day you will say:

"Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done, and proclaim that his name is exalted.

⁵Sing to the LORD, for he has done glorious things; let this be known to all the world.

⁶Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel among you."

Original Meaning

THIS BEAUTIFUL TWO-PART hymn concludes the first subdivision of chapters 7–39. Isaiah has challenged Ahaz to trust the Holy One of Israel, who has revealed himself to Isaiah. When Ahaz rejected that invitation and the

offered sign of God's presence with his people, Isaiah announced that what Ahaz had trusted in place of God—Assyria—would turn on Judah and destroy it. But, demonstrating how genuinely trustworthy God is, the prophet then declared that God would give light in place of Judah's self-induced darkness—light in the form of a descendant of David who would be "God with us." Furthermore, once Israel faced the fact that it was God who controlled her destiny and not Assyria, God would demonstrate that truth by destroying arrogant Assyria and bringing about a messianic kingdom of peace peopled not only with his own people but also with representatives of all the nations. Should such a God be trusted? Absolutely!

That is just the response we find in 12:1–6. God should be trusted simply because he is God, but how much more he should be trusted when we realize that he himself has turned his righteous anger to "comfort" or encouragement. As on the shores of the Red Sea, the people can say what they have learned about God: He is "strength," he is "song," he is "salvation." Who would not trust such a God as this? Drawing "water from the wells of salvation" is not only to avail oneself of the deliverance God has offered, but it is also to live out the implications of that salvation in obedience and witness, as Psalm 116:13–14 makes clear.

Just as the elements of hope in the introduction (Isa. 2:1–5; 4:2–6) led us to believe, the immediate results of redemption and salvation (12:1–3) are witness to the nations (12:4–6). The same thing is true in microcosm in the prophet's own call. He was not cleansed so that he could enjoy the condition of being cleansed but so that he could declare God's word to the people.

Verse 4 gives a short course in the behavior of the believer: thanks, prayer, and witness. The witness is to what God "has done" and to the obvious conclusion: There is no one with a character ("name") so high and holy as his. The witness is in the form of a song. Works like those the Holy One has performed cannot be proclaimed with a long face. They must be sung "to all the world" (v. 5).

Bridging Contexts

THIS CHAPTER IS BRIM-FULL of evangelical theology. God is the One who initiates salvation. There is nothing that Israel did to earn God's grace toward them. If there was to be reconciliation, it would have to come from God. Trust (or faith) does not produce reconciliation but is a response to the reconciliation announced. As such, it is the only adequate response. When God himself has satisfied his own justice and invites us to trust him, what else can we do?

This means that our response must finally issue in songs. No other form of human expression so captures the whole human psyche as does singing. Furthermore, there is a continuity in the songs of Zion that flows from the shores of the Red Sea to the shores of the "glassy sea" around which all the saints will gather:

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth. (Rev. 5:9–10)

Contemporary Significance

CHRISTIANS TODAY WHO THINK about this chapter cannot help but reflect on the work of Christ. Paul says, "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19 RSV). That says it all. God reconciled us to himself through his own work on the Cross. Reconciliation is by nature a two-way street, but not in this case. There was nothing we could offer to God in the way of negotiation. We were condemned sinners, estranged from God and alienated from life (John 3:18; Eph. 4:18; Col. 1:21). But God found a way to satisfy his own justice in that Christ has died in our place. In place of judgment he has come to offer us encouragement.

It is no accident that the Holy Spirit is called the "Comforter" in King James English. Unfortunately the word "comfort" has become so watered down that we can no longer use it in contemporary translations. But

"comfort" in its original sense is exactly what God the Holy Spirit has come to do for us. He has come to enable us to stand before the Accuser and know ourselves forgiven. He has come to tell us all is not lost when we have failed again. He has come to enable us to stand before a mocking world with love and fortitude. None of this is in us but is in the power of Christ's cross and resurrection.

The story is told that in the late 1940s when the Indian constitution was being debated, an article prohibiting proselytization was proposed. But one legislator, who was not a Christian, rose and said that would involve them in self-contradiction. When asked why, he pointed out that they had already adopted an article guaranteeing freedom of religion and said that Christians had to seek converts; it was a part of their religion! The article prohibiting proselytization failed. Not only is this a characterization of Christianity, it is true of biblical religion as a whole (note Jesus' comment about the Pharisees' zeal for converts, Matt. 23:15). If God is the sole Creator of this world and if after we have alienated ourselves from him, he has found a way for us to come home again, that is news the whole created world needs to hear. How can we keep silent?

Isaiah 13:1–22

AN ORACLE CONCERNING Babylon that Isaiah son of Amoz saw:

²Raise a banner on a bare hilltop, shout to them;
beckon to them to enter the gates of the nobles.
³I have commanded my holy ones;
I have summoned my warriors to carry out my wrath—those who rejoice in my triumph.

⁴Listen, a noise on the mountains, like that of a great multitude!
Listen, an uproar among the kingdoms, like nations massing together!
The LORD Almighty is mustering an army for war.

⁵They come from faraway lands,

from the ends of the heavens—
the LORD and the weapons of his wrath—
to destroy the whole country.

⁶Wail, for the day of the LORD is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty.

⁷Because of this, all hands will go limp, every man's heart will melt.

⁸Terror will seize them, pain and anguish will grip them; they will writhe like a woman in labor.

They will look aghast at each other, their faces aflame.

⁹See, the day of the LORD is coming —a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger—

to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it.

¹⁰The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light.

The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light.

¹¹I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins.

I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and will humble the pride of the ruthless.

¹²I will make man scarcer than pure gold, more rare than the gold of Ophir.

¹³Therefore I will make the heavens tremble;

and the earth will shake from its place at the wrath of the LORD Almighty, in the day of his burning anger.

¹⁴Like a hunted gazelle, like sheep without a shepherd, each will return to his own people, each will flee to his native land.

¹⁵Whoever is captured will be thrust through;

all who are caught will fall by the sword.

¹⁶Their infants will be dashed to pieces before their eyes; their houses will be looted and their wives rayished.

17See, I will stir up against them the Medes, who do not care for silver and have no delight in gold.
18Their bows will strike down the young men; they will have no mercy on infants nor will they look with compassion on children.

19 Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms, the glory of the Babylonians' pride, will be overthrown by God like Sodom and Gomorrah.
20 She will never be inhabited or lived in through all generations; no Arab will pitch his tent there, no shepherd will rest his flocks there.
21 But desert creatures will lie there, jackals will fill her houses; there the owls will dwell, and there the wild goats will leap about.

22Hyenas will howl in her strongholds, jackals in her luxurious palaces.Her time is at hand, and her days will not be prolonged.

Original Meaning

As NOTED IN the introduction, Isaiah 7–12 and 36–39 are "bookends," dealing with the different ways in which two Judean kings, Ahaz and Hezekiah, approach the problem of trust in God in the face of serious military/political threats to their kingdom. But what lies between in the intervening chapters? We might call them "Lessons in Trust."

It is as though the student has failed the examination in chapters 7–12. So before this student is allowed to take the examination again in chapter 36, some tutoring is necessary. The tutoring falls into three sessions: chapters

13–23; 24–27; and 28–33, with a wrap-up in 34–35. Here are some of the subjects covered in the tutoring sessions:

- Why trust the nations when they are under judgment from God (chs. 13–23)?
- Why trust the nations when all of history is in our God's hands (chs. 24–27)?
- Those who counsel you to trust flesh and blood instead of the Spirit of God are fools (chs. 28–35).

Once these lessons have been presented, it will be time to take the test again, but this time, as the prophet has foretold, for much higher stakes: not merely for the survival of the Davidic dynasty but for the very survival of the nation.

The material in chapters 13–23 fits a category found in several of the prophets: oracles against the nations (see esp. Jer. 46–51; Ezek. 25–32, but note also Obadiah and Nahum, which are each composed of a single such oracle—Obadiah against Edom and Nahum against Assyria). In general these oracles are God's way of saying that just because he chooses to use the pagan nations as his tool to judge disobedient Israel and Judah does not mean those nations are going to escape judgment for their sins. Israel will be restored after disciplinary punishment, but some of these nations are going to disappear from the face of the earth.

As I have already said, the oracles against the nations have been placed at this point in the book of Isaiah to emphasize the foolishness of trusting in the nations, something Ahaz has done and Hezekiah will be tempted to do. They may also be at this place to underline the certainty of the promises of restoration made in Isaiah 11. The nations will not be able to hold their captives because God will certainly judge them. The particular nations marked for judgment are Babylon (13:1–14:23; 21:1–10 [and Assyria, 14:24–27]), Philistia (14:28–32), Moab (15:1–16:14), Damascus (Syria, 17:1–14), Cush (Nubia and Ethiopia, 18:1–7), Egypt (19:1–20:6), Dumah (Edom? 21:11–12), Arabia (21:13–17), Jerusalem (Judah, 22:1–25), and Tyre (23:1–18). There is no obvious reason for this particular selection or this particular arrangement, although scholars have tried valiantly to find

one. About the most one can say is that it is an inclusive list, covering the whole ancient Near Eastern world (omitting only Ammon), beginning with the great commercial power in the east, Babylon, and concluding with the great commercial power in the west, Tyre.

Address Against Babylon (13:1)

THE FACT THAT the first oracle (chs. 13–14) begins with Babylon, which was not a world power in Isaiah's lifetime, is often taken to be proof of the late date of the book. According to this argument, the later editors of the book, realizing that it was Babylon to whom Judah fell and not Assyria, inserted this oracle at this point. But the opening lines of chapter 13 seem to have been designed precisely to counter such a conclusion. We are told that "Isaiah son of Amoz," not some later editor, saw this oracle against Babylon. Either this is a truthful statement or a deception. If it is a deception, then the reliability of the other things that are said in the book, including its theological claims, are all in question. The final chapter of this division (ch. 39) shows that Isaiah clearly understood Babylon as the enemy to whom Judah would finally fall.

If we grant Isaiah enough perspicuity to know that Babylon was Judah's real enemy, then it is not too much to believe that God could have inspired this oracle, especially since it contains many features that were perennially true of Babylon.³ Even during the time of the Assyrian Empire, Babylon was the center of culture and civilization in the Mesopotamian valley and indeed in the entire Near East. Thus, it is fitting to begin a series of judgments against human power and glory with an oracle against Babylon.⁴

When compared with the other oracle against Babylon in 21:1–10, chapters 13–14 have a much more universal flavor. The very stars and constellations are darkened (13:10), the whole world is punished for its arrogance and haughtiness (13:11⁵), and the "heavens" and "earth" will be shaken. The king of Babylon (ch. 14) is also clearly much more than one particular ruler, although Sargon II of Assyria may have provided the model (see comments on 14:16–21). Clearly this figure represents all creaturely pride that believes it can contend with God for rule of the world. Thus, the introductory oracle uses Babylon to represent the pride and glory of all creation and to argue that at its greatest and highest, there is no reason to

trust any such creatures, because the Lord God will bring them all down into the dust.

The Terror of Coming Judgment (13:2–8)

In this stanza the terror of the coming judgment is emphasized. Once again (cf. 5:26), a signal "banner" is run up to call the various nations to come against God's enemy in judgment (13:2; see 5:26). But these armies come from the very "ends of the heavens" (13:5). This is not a merely historical judgment but an eschatological one. Furthermore, there is no question who is the effective cause of this uproar. It is "I," "the LORD Almighty," "the Almighty." Even the mightiest and most glorious of earth's nations is no match for the God who has placed his name on Jerusalem. Against him there will be no mighty blows, only limp hands and melted hearts (13:7). Nor will there be any arrogant looks, only the red faces of shame and disgrace (13:8).

The Sin of Pride (13:9–13)

As seen in the earliest chapters of Isaiah, the greatest of all the sins of creation is the sin of pride. For those who depend for their very existence on the continued grace of a loving Creator to act as if they are somehow ultimate is the worst trespass upon reality imaginable. Oftentimes, the pagan deification of humanity expresses itself in the fiction that the gods, made in human form, are the stars. In fact, says Isaiah, the opposite is true. Far from the stars being the guarantee of our lordship of creation, they are the dutiful servants of the Almighty, and they will not escape the cataclysms when he punishes rebellious earth. He will darken them and shake them (13:10, 13).

The Collapse of Power (13:14–22)

ISAIAH NOW TAKES up a somewhat more historical note, although the language still retains a distinctly universalistic tone. Verses 14–15 describe the break-up of the collection of city-states out of which every ancient empire was crafted. As the central power began to collapse, it was quickly every city ("native land") for itself, as everyone rushed to get some modicum of protection. But, in fact, there would be no protection, for the

strongest of men could not save his wife, his children, or his possessions (13:16).

The "Medes" were a warlike people from the Zagros Mountains east of the Tigris River (in what is today Iran). They seem to have loved fighting more than ruling, for they were successively allied with Assyria, Babylon, and Persia. Only the Greeks under Alexander proved their match, and even the Greeks spoke of the Medes with a certain degree of awe. Here (13:17), with prophetic inspiration, Isaiah recognizes that the Medes are the ones who will undo the Mesopotamian power as they first join Babylon to destroy Assyria and then join the Persians to wipe out Babylon. Neither the strong ("the young men") nor the weak ("infants," "children," 13:18) will receive any quarter from them, so that Babylon's destruction will be complete (13:19–22).

Although the Medo-Persian conquest of Babylon did not signal the city's immediate demise, it did signal the beginning of the end. The Persians had dual capital cities in Susa in Persia and Ecbatana in Media, while the successors of Alexander made their capitol in Antioch of Syria. Thus, the greatest city in the ancient world went into a slow decline so that in the eighteenth century A.D., even its location was unknown. Isaiah's prophecy about its becoming a haunt of "hyenas" and "jackals" (13:22) came true with a vengeance. Was it the glory of the world? Listen to the owls hooting in its windows and the goats bleating as they jump over the stumps of its walls!

Bridging Contexts

ON THE SURFACE, Isaiah seems to be picking an uneven fight. What can the God of tiny little Jerusalem do to mighty Babylon? Of course Isaiah knows something that the rulers of Babylon do not. The Holy One of Israel is the sole God of the whole world, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Yes, it *is* an uneven fight, but in the exact opposite direction from what the Babylonians may be thinking.

Many years after Isaiah, when Babylon was at the height of its power, the God of the exiled Judeans humbled Nebuchadnezzar, the mightiest Babylonian king of all time, to eat grass like an ox (Dan. 4:24–35). The

words that Nebuchadnezzar spoke at the end of that experience are true then and now (see 4:34b–35):

His dominion is an eternal dominion;
his kingdom endures from generation to generation.
All the peoples of the earth
are regarded as nothing.
He does as he pleases
with the powers of heaven
and the peoples of the earth.
No one can hold back his hand
or say to him, "What have you done?"

Compared to the glory of the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, the glory of the greatest Babylon that the earth can produce is only dust and ashes.

John the Revelator said much the same thing six centuries after Nebuchadnezzar, when he depicted the Babylon of his day, Rome, as a gorgeous prostitute to whom all the great of the earth came. Yet, using language that clearly combines that used to describe Babylon here and Tyre in Isaiah 23, the prophet writes that all her wealth and power will come to nothing:

"Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!

She has become a home for demons and a haunt for every evil spirit,

a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird.

For all the nations have drunk

the maddening wine of her adulteries.

The kings of the earth have committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries.

'Woe! Woe, O great city,

O Babylon, city of Power!

In one hour your doom has come!" (Rev. 18:2–3, 10)

Today, all that remains of ancient Rome is a collection of impressive ruins. "Eternal Rome" did not last for even a thousand years. More recently, the world-spanning British Empire, on which "the sun never set," was more presciently described by Rudyard Kipling when he said, "Lo, all our wealth of yesterday is one with Nineveh and Tyre."

Contemporary Significance

IT IS ALL TOO EASY to be blown away by the glory of this world. We see the glamour of the movie stars; we see the power that wealth gives; we see aircraft carriers and intercontinental ballistic missiles, and we think, "Ah, there is reality." But that is not where glory resides. Isaiah heard the seraphim correctly when they sang, "The whole earth is full of his glory."

Imagine if New York City, arguably the most glamorous and powerful city on the earth, were struck with a nuclear attack this afternoon. What would all the glamour and power be worth in one millisecond? Exactly nothing. Isaiah knows nothing about nuclear physics, but he knows about a God to whom earth's mightiest nuclear explosion is less than a sneeze. What is the fusion of a few atoms of uranium to the One who spoke a word of command and the "Big Bang" occurred?

Yet we all, like the ancient Hebrews, persist in trusting everything else before God. We give our allegiance to flesh and blood, to physical things, as though they can give us significance and worth. In fact, they are all passing faster than we can imagine. In childhood the days seem to stretch on and on forever, and the month of December takes several years to pass—or so it seems. With the passing of years, the days begin to fly by, and we begin to see that some things we thought were so important will shortly be gone.

So wisdom asks: What will survive the wreck of all human accomplishments? It is not the works of humans, amassed by cleverness and oppression. Nor is it even our finer works of art and culture. In the end, while they may survive their creators, they are as fragile as we are. One day the finest cathedrals will fall, as did Solomon's temple. One day, the Mona Lisa will crumble into dust. If we trust our power, someone will emerge more powerful than we; if we trust our intelligence, someone will emerge smarter than we; if we trust our creativity, someone will emerge more

creative than we; if we trust our allies, they will one day run away before an enemy mightier than we, and they may even become the enemy themselves.

Whence comes this endless string of supersedence? It comes from the fact that we are neither self-originating nor self-authenticating. Thus, it is foolish to trust in humanity that has breath in its nostrils (Isa. 2:22). Rather, we should be looking to the eternal, which will not pass away. We may love our country and grieve over the unmistakable signs of its demise that are all around us. But if we put our hope in its eventual recovery and success, that is a vain hope. Yes, God may give us a revival, and we may have years to come. But the end is inevitable. Why trust the veil when we may trust him who is behind the veil and will assuredly one day pull that veil to the ground?

Once again, Christ's words come to mind: "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock" (Matt. 7:24). If we put our trust in God and give our lives to finding out his nature and purposes, that will endure whatever crashes time may bring on us. Nations may—indeed, will—fall, but we can stand. The apostle Peter said it well when he said,

Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:10–11)

While the "these things" he is talking about may be our calling and election, it is more likely that he is referring to the "these things" in verses 8–9 (NIV "these qualities" in v. 8, "them" in v. 9), namely, the virtues of faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love. These will endure because they are the very qualities of God. If we, in response to his grace, have given our lives to pursuing him, we too will endure (John 12:25–26).

Isaiah 14:1-27

¹THE LORD WILL have compassion on Jacob; once again he will choose Israel and will settle them in their own land. Aliens will join them and unite with the house of Jacob.
 ²Nations will take them and bring them to their own place. And the house of Israel will possess the nations as menservants and maidservants in the LORD's land.
 They will make captives of their captors and rule over their oppressors.

³On the day the LORD gives you relief from suffering and turmoil and cruel bondage, ⁴you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon:

How the oppressor has come to an end!
How his fury has ended!

The LORD has broken the rod of the wicked,
the scepter of the rulers,

which in anger struck down peoples with unceasing blows,
and in fury subdued nations with relentless aggression.

All the lands are at rest and at peace; they break into singing.

Even the pine trees and the cedars of Lebanon exult over you and say,

Now that you have been laid low,

no woodsman comes to cut us down."

⁹The grave below is all astir to meet you at your coming; it rouses the spirits of the departed to greet you— all those who were leaders in the world; it makes them rise from their thrones— all those who were kings over the nations.

¹⁰They will all respond, they will say to you,

"You also have become weak, as we are; you have become like us."

11 All your pomp has been brought down to the grave, along with the noise of your harps; maggots are spread out beneath you and worms cover you.

12How you have fallen from heaven,
O morning star, son of the dawn!
You have been cast down to the earth,
you who once laid low the nations!
13You said in your heart,
"I will ascend to heaven;
I will raise my throne
above the stars of God;
I will sit enthroned on the mount of
assembly,
on the utmost heights of the sacred
mountain.
14I will ascend above the tops of the cloud

¹⁴I will ascend above the tops of the clouds;I will make myself like the Most High."

¹⁵But you are brought down to the grave,

to the depths of the pit.

16 Those who see you stare at you, they ponder your fate:
"Is this the man who shook the earth and made kingdoms tremble,
17 the man who made the world a desert, who overthrew its cities and would not let his captives go home?"

18 All the kings of the nations lie in state, each in his own tomb.
19 But you are cast out of your tomb like a rejected branch; you are covered with the slain, with those pierced by the sword, those who descend to the stones of the pit.

Like a corpse trampled underfoot,

²⁰you will not join them in burial,
for you have destroyed your land
and killed your people.

The offspring of the wicked will never be mentioned again.

21 Prepare a place to slaughter his sons for the sins of their forefathers; they are not to rise to inherit the land and cover the earth with their cities.

²²"I will rise up against them," declares the LORD Almighty.
"I will cut off from Babylon her name and survivors, her offspring and descendants," declares the LORD.

23"I will turn her into a place for owls and into swampland;
I will sweep her with the broom of destruction," declares the LORD Almighty.

²⁴The LORD Almighty has sworn,

"Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will stand.

²⁵I will crush the Assyrian in my land; on my mountains I will trample him down.

His yoke will be taken from my people, and his burden removed from their shoulders."

²⁶This is the plan determined for the whole world;

this is the hand stretched out over all nations.

27For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him?His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?

Original Meaning

ISAIAH 14 CONTINUES the general pronouncement of judgment on creaturely pride, using Babylon as a vehicle. Here, after some words of encouragement to Israel (vv. 1–4a), Isaiah focuses on the downfall of the so-called "king of Babylon" (vv. 4b–21). The section on Babylon then closes with a statement from God on what it is he is doing to the Mesopotamian powers (vv. 22–27).

Students of this passage have long been aware that much more than some individual human monarch is being talked about. Just as in Ezekiel 28,

where the fall of the "king of Tyre" is discussed, the language is much too sweeping and expressive to be talking only about one human being. As a result, some of the church fathers understood this passage and Ezekiel 28 to be primarily talking about Satan (see esp. Isa. 14:12–15). John Milton drew on this exegesis for his epic poem, *Paradise Lost*. However, the great expositors of the Reformation, Luther and Calvin, do not support this latter interpretation, arguing that the passage is discussing human pride, not angelic pride. We actually know very little about Satan's origins from the Bible, especially if Revelation 12:8–9 are discussing events at the end of time and not those before time began. Jesus tells us that he saw Satan fall (Luke 10:18), but beyond that we have little other information.

It is generally agreed that the poem in Isaiah 14:4b–21 is one of the finest in the Hebrew language. The four stanzas are set up as a "lament," a song mourning the death of someone, with the typical meter of a lament and much of the typical vocabulary. The first stanza (vv. 4b–8) considers earth's reaction to the death; the second (vv. 9–11), the underworld's response; the third (vv. 12–15), heaven's perspective; finally (vv. 16–21), a return to contemplate the dead person's tragic fate on earth. But this is not a typical lament. Far from it! It is a biting parody of a lament. Instead of expressing grief over the death of the tyrant, it expresses both delight and satisfaction. Death is welcomed as the leveler of the tyrant's proud and oppressive ambition.

Words of Promise to Israel (14:1–4a)

Between the announcement of the destruction of Babylon in Isaiah 13 and that of Babylon's king in chapter 14 are words of promise to Israel. If rejection and implacable judgment by God lie in the future for the descendants of Jacob, those are not God's final word. For further out in the future, beyond those realities, lie still greater realities: divine "compassion" and a reaffirmation of God's choosing of them to be his own people. If it is true that the land will one day spit them out (cf. Lev. 18:28), it is also true that beyond that day is another day when God will once more "settle them in their own land." Once more the prophet affirms that the coming destruction is not because the Mesopotamian powers are so great that God cannot stop them. No, those powers are mere tools in his hand, and once their work is finished, they too will come in for judgment while Israel will be restored to all the promises.

Not only will Israel be freed from the onerous grip of the nations, but either the nations must become partners with Israel (as in Isa. 2:2–5) or they will have to submit to the rule of Israel (14:1b–2)! If the oppression of the tyrants seems endless, Israel must remember that such rule is strictly limited and that someday the tables will be radically turned. How exciting it must have been for the Judean exiles as they recognized the arrival of Cyrus whom Isaiah had predicted and so knew that the hour for the overthrow of the Babylonian tyrant had arrived, the hour when they could sing Isaiah's song not as a prediction but as a fact. The faithful among them had sung it secretly in daring hope, but now it could be sung openly, as 14:3–4a promised.

Rest for People on Earth (14:4b–8)

A TYPICAL LAMENT might begin by saying how earth's inhabitants are struck over the news of the departed's death. But here the poet tells in anticipation how grateful the people on earth are to have "rest" (v. 7) from the repeated blows of the oppressor's rod (vv. 5–6). The Lord "has broken the rod." What good news! In the years between 855 and 555 B.C., we almost lose count of the number of times a rampaging Mesopotamian army devastated Israel and Judah. What good news to know that the hammer blows are over.

Nor is it just human beings who are glad to know that the reign of terror is over. The whole creation, including the trees, are glad (v. 8). Isaiah here seems to show an awareness of the writings of the Assyrian kings, who regularly boasted how they cut down the mighty forests of Lebanon both for lumber for their engines of war and also for the beautification of their palaces and temples. Human pride sees both humans and nature as fodder to be consumed in support of its towering pretensions, so even nature breathes a sigh of relief when the news of that pride's death is announced.

The Underworld (14:9–11)

THE PICTURE CHANGES from the earth to the underworld (NIV, "the grave"; Heb. \check{s}^e 'ol). In place of the peace and quiet that the tyrant's death has brought to the earth, the underworld is in an uproar. All the kings have been sitting on their thrones. Now they rise, stretching their necks to get a glimpse of this newcomer. He is the one who sneeringly sent them on their way to this grim and dusty place, and now he has come to join them! In the

end he is no stronger than they were. He could no more prevent his death than they could theirs.

Verse 11 is a masterpiece of sarcasm and irony. We see a funeral celebration where a gorgeously bedecked bier is carried past with "pomp" and with lovely music played by "harps" and other instruments. "Beautiful," we say. Then the picture suddenly changes. All is deathly still, and we see that the beautiful bier and its coverings are nothing but a writhing mass of "maggots." Human pretension is no match for the grim reality of death and decay.

A Message from Heaven (14:12–15)

THE PICTURE CHANGES AGAIN, this time to heaven. What has this world emperor sought to do in his towering egotism? In effect, he has tried to take the place of the Holy One. The language here has intriguing overtones of several ancient stories about both human and divine hubris, and scholars have expended a good deal of energy seeking for the original poem that the prophet supposedly makes use of. There seems to be a scholarly antipathy to the idea that anything in the Bible could be original. However, the search has not paid off, and it still seems as if Isaiah has taken a number of themes familiar to his hearers and woven them together into a new creation to make his unique theological point.³

In verses 13–14, the egotist has made four boasts about what he will do: He will rule above even the stars; he will sit on the highest mountaintop, from which the king of the gods rules; he will ascend into the highest heaven ("above the tops of the clouds"); and he will become equal to God himself.⁴ Isaiah recognizes that when we make our own selves the most important thing in our world, we are usurping the rightful place of God. But this man, who thought to make himself equal to God, is mocked by death, which has taken him from the "heights" (v. 13) of his own pretensions to the "depths of the pit" (v. 15) in one terrible moment.

The Tragedy of the Fallen King (14:16–21)

THE FINAL STANZA of the poem contemplates the tragedy of this mighty man. He is said to have suffered an ignominious death and to have left behind no children. It may be that the original poem ended at verse 20a, with verses 20b–21 added later, since the inclusion of this material makes

the stanza significantly longer than the first two. But it must be admitted that Western ideas of literary symmetry may be different from those of the Hebrews.

As was said in the opening discussion at the beginning of chapter 13, no single individual is being addressed here. This "king of Babylon" is a composite of all the proud, despotic kings who have ruled on the earth. However, one of the prouder and more despotic ones was Sargon II of Assyria, who ruled from 721 until 705 B.C. While we cannot say for certain, it seems likely he was the one Assyrian emperor who died on the battlefield. We do know that after his death, there was what one author calls a "general defection and rebellion" that took Sargon's son Sennacherib a number of years to quell.⁵ It is also interesting that Sennacherib was killed by his own sons, who were in turn slaughtered by the eventual successor to the throne, a usurper named Esarhaddon. Thus, Sargon and Sennacherib together may have provided models for this stanza.

Verses 16–20 show people staring at the mangled corpse of the tyrant lying in a heap of other corpses in a pit (see esp. v. 19). This agrees with the idea of a battlefield death. Instead of a dignified death and an honorable burial, the corpse is abandoned in the field, perhaps in a hasty retreat. But again, we need to remind ourselves that this is not a historical narrative but a poem about human pride, so we should not work overly hard to make everything consistent. The point is one of final and complete humiliation for the most vaunting arrogance. Far from being equal to God, this king is not even equal to the other kings he has killed. They at least have their own tombs; pride has none. It is thrown away, as it was customary to throw away a miscarried fetus.⁶

But not only does the proud king have no decent burial, neither does he have any continuing dynasty. Verses 20b–21 express the hope that the oppressor will have no offspring to carry on his name. Thus his destruction is complete. He has neither a memorial in stone nor one in flesh. His very memory is blotted out. This is entirely fitting, for his pride has not only destroyed the lands of others (v. 17), it has destroyed his own land as well (v. 20). This is the end of the pride that says it will sit on the throne of God: absolute and complete destruction.

THE CONCLUSION OF the two-part oracle against "Babylon" and its king also takes two parts. The first (vv. 22–23) is more general, while verses 24–27 form a specific example. As we saw in 2:6–4:1, this is a characteristic feature of the composition of the book.

In 14:22–23 the thought of the immediately preceding verses is continued and expanded. Not only will the king of Babylon have no offspring and thus no living memorial, neither will Babylon itself. As noted in the comments on Isaiah 13, the city is to be forgotten completely and to become merely a haunt for animals of the night and of the swamp.

In 14:24–27, the prophet gives a specific example of this destruction of Babylon, namely, the coming downfall of Assyria. The fact that there is no introductory "oracle" formula here gives us a clue that this is not a separate oracle against Assyria but should be read as a conclusion to the "Babylon" oracle. Assyria represents all the Mesopotamian powers subsumed under the head "Babylon," which have exalted themselves to the heights and must therefore eventually go down into the pit. Any person or nation that lifts itself up against the "plan" and "purpose" of God (14:24, 26–27) marks itself for destruction. Verse 25 seems to refer to the destruction of Sennacherib's army in Judah in 701 B.C. (as described in 37:36). Whatever the mighty Assyrian king may have planned in his pride to do to Jerusalem (10:7) means nothing compared to the plans of God.

Bridging Contexts

PRIDE. When we think of human pride, we think first of all of the will. It is the human will that has gone astray, that reverses the words of Jesus (Mark 14:36) and says, "Not *thy* will but *mine* be done." For what is human pride except an attempt to set ourselves up in the place of God in our world? Notice the five recurrences of the pronoun "I" in Isa. 14:13–14. Pride is to place myself and my will at the center of creation.

One of the most telling descriptions of this pride in recent literature is found in C. S. Lewis's book in the Narnia series *The Magician's Nephew*. The first description of pride is seen in the magician and his complete focusing on himself and what he is trying to do. His nephew, Digby, is nothing but a pawn for his uncle's researches. But the more chilling picture is found when Digby and his friend Jill arrive by magic in the world of

Charn. This world seems completely dead and empty. Yet obviously it was once a place of great culture and civilization. The children make their way into a great crumbling palace and into a long hall filled with statues seated on thrones. The earliest statues are of people who seem energetic and approachable. But as the children proceed down the line of statues, they notice how each one seems greater and haughtier and more terrible than the previous one.

Finally they come to the last one, a great queen grander and more terrifying than all the rest. In the center of the room is a table with a crystal bell on it, and Digby, against Jill's advice, cannot resist ringing it. When he does, all the statues crumble to dust except the last one, and she, Queen Jadis, comes to life, standing before the children in all her commanding splendor. She is disappointed to find that her last summons upon dying has only brought a child to restore her to life, and she is contemptuous to discover that they do not even know that is why they have come.

So she tells them the story of Charn. The long line of kings and queens of Charn had come down to Jadis and her sister, who struggled for the throne of the kingdom. Having devastated their world with their wars, it finally appeared that the sister had won and that Jadis would have to bow. But that she refused to do. She knew a secret word that would instantly kill everyone on Charn but would one day restore her to life to rule the dead planet alone. Rather than bow to her sister, she chose to speak that word. That is pride, and we think of the words John Milton puts in Satan's mouth in *Paradise Lost*: "Better to rule in Hell, than serve in Heaven."

Another telling reflection on these truths is found in Shelley's sonnet "Ozymandias," allegedly composed while looking at the fallen statue of the great Egyptian Pharaoh Ramesses in the Nubian Desert. The final lines read,

"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!: Nothing beside remains. Round the decay Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare The lone and level sands stretch far away." This poem beautifully sums up Isaiah's comment on pride because it reflects not only the destructive nature of pride but also its essential silliness. How can humans who die think they can play God? That mortals think they can give their petty activities eternal worth when they will one day leave all of their achievements behind to succumb to inevitable decay and destruction is amazing. Death is the great leveler—the bane of the arrogant and the hope of the oppressed.

The Chase, a film starring Dennis Weaver, sums up this message of death's deliverance in a powerful way. It tells the story of the driver of a car who inadvertently cuts off a huge tractor-trailer truck while passing it. For reasons the viewer never learns, the driver of the truck goes berserk and takes it upon himself to force Weaver into a crash that will probably kill him. He rear-ends the car several times and tries to force Weaver off the road on a couple of other occasions. So Weaver tries to outrun the truck, but his car is a small, underpowered compact, and he cannot seem to get away. When he does once and stops in a roadside diner to let the crazy man go on past, he comes out of the diner to find the truck waiting for him.

Finally, in complete desperation, Weaver turns up a small gravel road on a mountainside, knowing it may be a dead end but not knowing where else to go. He skids around a hairpin curve, almost losing control and going off a cliff, which is exactly what the truck does do, hurtling over the edge to crash far below. Weaver coasts to a stop and slowly backs up. He gets out of the car and walks cautiously to the edge, clearly fearful that somehow, against all odds, the monster is going to come roaring up over the edge. But it does not, and the final scene shows Weaver, completely exhausted, sitting on the edge of the cliff tossing pebbles at the wreck below, emitting sounds somewhere between a sigh and a chuckle. Death finally spells the end to the aggressive pride of humanity.

The plan and purpose of God. There is one other important thought in this material that bears mentioning here: the idea of the plan and purpose of God (14:24–27). Here again, there is a contrast highlighted. The Assyrian king had his plans, but they were not God's plans (cf. 10:6–8). This theme recalls Proverbs 19:21: "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails." This brings us full circle to the thought that opened this section: the human will. The reason why the exaltation of the

individual human will is so foolish is that God has a plan and purpose for each of us.

This is not to say that there is some immense blueprint for all of existence in some vast chamber in heaven. Nor does it mean that each of us has but one chance to "get it right," which, if we fail, will forever doom us to second best. The blueprint image has some utility, but it is only an image and thus has serious limitations. God is so creative that he is able to continually revise his tactical plans without ever altering his final strategic goal. The point is that since the Creator has a purpose, it is perfectly foolish for any of us to exalt our will against his. That way is frustration, danger, and endless loss.

Contemporary Significance

PRIDE AND HUMAN WILL. In our own day, who could better represent the "king of Babylon" than the two greatest murderers of all time: Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin? Each in his own way expected to leave behind him an empire that would encompass the world. And because of his towering pride, each one believed in his absolute right to destroy every single human being who in any way seemed to thwart the arrogant vision. Each one was willing to reduce not only the world, *but his own kingdom* (Isa. 14:20), to destruction if necessary to achieve his goals. How the oppressed of the world breathed a sigh of relief when each of these monsters, correctly termed, died. Their pride was brought down into the dust, on their particularly vicious cruelty no longer existed on the earth.

Both of these men had been influenced by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche despised Christianity because he claimed it "feminized" men. It robbed males of their native aggression, impatience, cruelty, and discourtesy and replaced those "virtues" with passivity, meekness, and sensitivity. In so doing, he argued, Christianity robbed males of the one essential for greatness, the will to power. The terrible fruit of Nietzsche's philosophy can be seen in the events of the Russian Revolution and World War II. He wanted the human race to stand forth in all its terrible glory. But in fact, he was only romanticizing sin, and sin cannot be romanticized in the end. As the apostle Paul says (Rom. 6:21, 23), the only

fruit sin bears is death, and *Romeo and Juliet* to the contrary, death is not romantic. It is simply sordid and awful.

That is especially clear in the horrifying photographs of death coming out of World War II. Whether it be the stacks of emaciated corpses at Auschwitz or the maggots crawling on the body of the American soldier lying face down in the sand on the beach of Tarawa, we have seen death as it is, and there is nothing romantic about it.

Nietzsche was also wrong about Christianity and the sexes. Kindness, gentleness, patience, and generosity are not distinctly feminine. To be sure, these virtues may express themselves somewhat differently in males than in females, but they are no more innate in women than in men. In fact, what we are seeing today is that women can be more brutal, aggressive, and coarse than men if they choose to be. If sin is not romantic, neither is it gender specific. Manipulative passivity is neither feminine nor Christian. It is the sinful response to apparent powerlessness and is manifested as much by men as by women in comparable circumstances.

But if manipulative passivity is not the answer to powerlessness, what is? Nietzsche said that it was to be more aggressive than the oppressor, to seize power by sheer force of will, and failing that to die with one's back in the corner snarling defiance at one's killers. William Ernest Henley, dying of tuberculosis, penned a poem in this vein that is a favorite among sophomores of all ages. The first two stanzas are as follows:

Out of the night that covers me, Black as the pit from pole to pole, I thank whatever gods may be For my unconquerable soul. In the fell clutch of circumstance I have not winced nor cried aloud. Under the bludgeonings of chance My head is bloody, but unbowed.¹¹

The tragedy for both Nietzsche and Henley is that they are diametrically wrong. It is the will to power, the unconquerable soul, that is at the root of all the problems of the human race. Pride kills, as Isaiah 14 says so eloquently. It kills those around it who cross its will, and finally it kills

itself as it plunges down in a deadly spiral where in the end it exists for itself alone.

This is a fact of human existence that we refuse to learn. Why is it a fact? A thousand hypotheses could be put forward, but the simplest one is the one given to us by our Creator in his revelation. The answer is that he is ultimate and we are not. Any attempt to make ourselves ultimate has results that are just as predictable as are the results of jumping off a tall building. We have been made to reflect the glory of the only God. If a mirror says, "No, I will reflect only myself" and pulls down all the shades and turns the lights off, it should not be surprised to discover there is nothing to reflect. The mirror has violated the terms of its creation. So it is that when we humans say, "I will live only for myself," we should not be surprised to discover that there is no life to be lived.

Surrendering our will to Christ. This means that the answer to powerlessness is not to try to seize power for ourselves and, failing the attempt, to die snarling. Rather, it is to surrender even our powerlessness to our heavenly Father and to find in him the power to "do all things" (Phil. 4:13 NASB). Here is power, when the oppressor cannot make us hate him or her. Here is power, when the victim need not hide behind victimization but finds his or her identity in rising above that grief to heights of generosity, forgiveness, and love. Here is power, when a raw deal is triumphed over with grace and self-forgetfulness.

But how are such things possible? How exactly do we surrender our powerlessness? We see it in Christ's words, "Not my will, but thine be done." The divine-human problem is a problem of the will, and until Christians have consciously surrendered their will to Christ their Lord or, in Paul's words, "have been crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:20), their own pride will keep defeating them. Paul makes it clear that a death is involved. We do not get up each day asking whether we think we might like to surrender our will today. This is a radical, even violent, decision that is of a once-for-all nature. Of course, its implications must be worked out every day, but it is not a new decision every day. Neither is it something we do on our own; rather, it is something we give the Holy Spirit permission to do.

But someone will say, "Surely, a little self-respect is a good thing. We can't go around all the time saying, 'Oh, I'm not worth anything.'" No, we cannot, and God does not expect us to. However, much of the modern "self-

esteem" movement is simply a failed attempt to counteract the effects of the increasing self-centeredness of this society. As parents have increasingly focused on their own needs and desires, children have been left in the dust. Children are incredibly perceptive, and they know what they are worth to their parents. Parents may shower the children with expensive toys and give them a few minutes of the misnamed "quality time" every day or so. But the child knows that he or she is really only one more of their parents' acquisitions—and a rather bothersome one at that. The child makes no real contribution to the family and knows it.

So how does society try to cope with this crisis? By encouraging parents to scale back on their wants and desires in order to be able to devote more time to integrating the child into the family? Never! The society instead tries to get children to say to themselves "I have worth!" To whom? Not to the only people who count. Instead, we are trying to counter the effects of an epidemic of self-centeredness with more self-centeredness. In a fallen world, the only hope for rediscovering the secret of individual worth is to discover how much we are actually worth to our heavenly Father. He was willing to die in our place. He not only loves us, he likes us! The sense of worth that springs from that knowledge is the furthest thing in the world from the kind of proud, lonely self-love that shouts to a deaf universe, "I am somebody!"

The apostle Paul sums up what I have just been saying in the well-known passage in Romans 12:1–2:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is —his good, pleasing and perfect will.

The sacrifice of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit ought to motivate us in a certain direction. That direction is expressed in three phases: the sacrificial surrender of our bodies to God, which will be the expression of a transformed way of thinking from that of the world, which has as its goal both the experiencing of, and the saying yes to, God's complete will in our lives. Surrender leads to life; pride leads to death.

Isaiah 14:28–32

THIS ORACLE CAME in the year King Ahaz died:

²⁹Do not rejoice, all you Philistines, that the rod that struck you is broken; from the root of that snake will spring up a viper, its fruit will be a darting, venomous serpent.

30 The poorest of the poor will find pasture, and the needy will lie down in safety.But your root I will destroy by famine; it will slay your survivors.

Wail, O gate! Howl, O city!
 Melt away, all you Philistines!
 A cloud of smoke comes from the north, and there is not a straggler in its ranks.

32What answer shall be given to the envoys of that nation?
"The LORD has established Zion, and in her his afflicted people will find refuge."

Original Meaning

ALTHOUGH THE DATES for the end of Ahaz's reign and the beginning of Hezekiah's are complicated by apparently contradictory datings in 2 Kings 18, it seems probable that Ahaz died in 716 B.C. and that Hezekiah either began to reign then or assumed full regnancy after having been coregent for some time. But it is not clear what the significance of Ahaz's death is for the meaning of this oracle. It is possible that the date has no significance for the interpretation of the judgment on Philistia, but since there are only three datings in Isaiah (Isa. 6:1; here; 20:1), that does not seem likely.

Nevertheless, the connection is unclear. If Ahaz had been a threat to the Philistines, it would be natural to say he was the broken rod who had struck the Philistines. But that is not the case. If anything the reverse was true, for 2 Chronicles 28:18 indicates that Ahaz lost several cities to the Philistines. Perhaps the date is significant because the Philistines had revolted against Assyria at this time and were urging the new king Hezekiah to join them because Assyria, "the rod that struck [us,] is broken." In 715 B.C. Sargon of Assyria was still trying to regain full control of the empire after his accession in 721, and the Philistines may have taken this prolonged struggle as a sign of weakness. If that is correct, Isaiah quickly disabuses them of such a false notion. In fact, Assyria's period of greatest strength is still in its youth and will continue to grow for another sixty years. Like Moses' staff, this "rod" will turn into a "snake," and the snake will give birth to a venomous "viper" (Isa. 14:29).

Verses 30 and 32 strengthen the suggestion that the Philistines are inviting the Judeans to join them in revolt. To this proposal, Isaiah answers that the Lord will take care of Judah without any help from the Philistines. Here again is the trust issue. Will Judah trust the nations or the Lord? They need not ally themselves with the Philistines because the Judeans are the flock of God, and he will tend them (14:30; see also 40:11). In fact, the great Philistines themselves will be consumed by a "cloud of smoke from the north" (14:31). This refers to the Assyrian armies coming south along the coast. Since "the LORD has established Zion," an alliance with a soon-to-be-destroyed neighbor is hardly necessary.

Bridging Contexts

THE ISSUE HERE is the folly of turning away from that which is secure to depend on what is failing. The Lord's help often seems so intangible while the material and physical seems so real. Today as in ancient times, we need prophets who will help us see the real fragility of what seems on the surface to be so strong.

Contemporary Significance

THE CHURCH TODAY is often in the position of Judah. We feel beleaguered on every hand, and we look for allies. Unfortunately, the allies to whom we are tempted to turn are weaker than us and in some cases are actually our enemies, just as Philistia was to Judah. We feel we need a large new facility and turn to a fund-raising consultant who has only veneered over the most cynical and manipulative methods of the world with a layer of superficial "spirituality."

Yet it is "Zion" that will survive when all the world's institutions are gone. Is it wrong "to spoil the Egyptians," to raid the world for its best products? No, but the history of the church's attempts to do this is a pretty sorry one. All too often we discover that the world's "best products" carry with them understandings of reality that are alien to everything the church stands for. All too often the subtle assumption on which these methods and approaches is based is that "God helps those who help themselves." Count Bismarck is reported to have said, "God is on the side of the big battalions." That is the world talking. The Bible says "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding" (Prov. 3:5). That is what Isaiah is saying.

Isaiah 15:1–16:14

AN ORACLE CONCERNING Moab:

Ar in Moab is ruined. destroyed in a night! Kir in Moab is ruined, destroyed in a night! ²Dibon goes up to its temple, to its high places to weep; Moab wails over Nebo and Medeba. Every head is shaved and every beard cut off. ³In the streets they wear sackcloth; on the roofs and in the public squares they all wail, prostrate with weeping. ⁴Heshbon and Elealeh cry out, their voices are heard all the way to Jahaz.

Therefore the armed men of Moab cry out, and their hearts are faint.

5My heart cries out over Moab; her fugitives flee as far as Zoar, as far as Eglath Shelishiyah.
They go up the way to Luhith, weeping as they go; on the road to Horonaim they lament their destruction.
6The waters of Nimrim are dried up and the grass is withered; the vegetation is gone and nothing green is left.
7So the wealth they have acquired and stored up

they carry away over the Ravine of the Poplars.

8Their outcry echoes along the border of Moab;
 their wailing reaches as far as Eglaim, their lamentation as far as Beer Elim.
 9Dimon's waters are full of blood, but I will bring still more upon Dimon

a lion upon the fugitives of Moab and upon those who remain in the land.

16:1 Send lambs as tribute
 to the ruler of the land,
 from Sela, across the desert,
 to the mount of the Daughter of Zion.
 Like fluttering birds
 pushed from the nest,
 so are the women of Moab
 at the fords of the Arnon.

3"Give us counsel, render a decision.
Make your shadow like night—at high noon.
Hide the fugitives, do not betray the refugees.
⁴Let the Moabite fugitives stay with you; be their shelter from the destroyer."

The oppressor will come to an end, and destruction will cease; the aggressor will vanish from the land.

⁵In love a throne will be established; in faithfulness a man will sit on it—

one from the house of David one who in judging seeks justice and speeds the cause of righteousness.

⁶We have heard of Moab's pride her overweening pride and conceit, her pride and her insolence but her boasts are empty. ⁷Therefore the Moabites wail, they wail together for Moab. Lament and grieve for the men of Kir Hareseth. ⁸The fields of Heshbon wither, the vines of Sibmah also. The rulers of the nations have trampled down the choicest vines. which once reached Jazer

and spread toward the desert.

Their shoots spread out and went as far as the sea.

⁹So I weep, as Jazer weeps, for the vines of Sibmah.

O Heshbon, O Elealeh, I drench you with tears!

The shouts of joy over your ripened fruit and over your harvests have been stilled.

¹⁰Joy and gladness are taken away from the orchards: no one sings or shouts in the vineyards;

no one treads out wine at the presses, for I have put an end to the shouting.

¹¹My heart laments for Moab like a harp, my inmost being for Kir Hareseth.

¹²When Moab appears at her high place,

she only wears herself out; when she goes to her shrine to pray, it is to no avail.

¹³This is the word the LORD has already spoken concerning Moab. ¹⁴But now the LORD says: "Within three years, as a servant bound by contract would count them, Moab's splendor and all her many people will be despised, and her survivors will be very few and feeble."

Original Meaning

THE ORACLE AGAINST Moab takes a very different tone, at least on the surface, from the ones against Babylon and her king. There, even though the oracle against the king took the form of a lament, there was no question that the prophet, speaking for Judah and Israel, took delight in the destruction of the proud oppressor. Here there seems to be genuine sorrow over the coming destruction of Moab. Perhaps this is because there was an unusually close relationship between Judah and Moab. The book of Ruth clearly illustrates this relationship. Not only did Naomi and Elimelech have no problem about resettling in Moab when a famine struck Judah, neither did Boaz seem to have any qualms about marrying the Moabitess Ruth after she converted to the worship of Yahweh.

At any rate, Isaiah 15 has no less than twelve occurrences of words for weeping, crying out, and lamenting (vv. 2, 3, 4, 5, 8). All but one of these occurrences speak of the Moabites weeping for the death and destruction being brought upon them. The one exception is found in verse 5, where Isaiah says, "My heart cries out over Moab." If this is not ironic, then the prophet is empathizing with the Moabites over the terrible losses they are suffering. In chapter 16 the same pattern appears, although less emphasis is placed on grieving in that chapter. There Moab's wailing is mentioned in 16:7, while 16:9 reads, "I weep, as Jazer weeps," and 16:11, "My heart laments for Moab." It is tempting to see the person being referred to here as God, since he is clearly the referent in verse 10.

With the exception of Kir (15:1), the towns and villages mentioned in 15:1–4 all are found in the northern part of Moab, the area given to the Israelite tribes of Gad and Reuben (Num. 32:34–38). The mention of Ar in the north and Kir³ in the south in Isaiah 15:1 gives that verse a certain comprehensive scope that enables it to function as an overall introduction. Verse 8 may have a similar kind of pairing, with Eglaim being near the northern border of Moab and Beer (Well of) Elim near the southern border. However, these two locations are much less firmly fixed than those in 15:1.

Although several of the sites mentioned in 15:5–8 are unknown, those that are known are in the southern part of Moab, south of the Arnon River. This north-to-south movement would have been characteristic of the flight of the Moabites southward before a marauding army heading south along the King's Highway from Damascus. The gods of Moab have failed (15:2), and the military men are helpless (15:4). Unless 15:6 is to be understood as figurative, nature has failed as well, for when the "fugitives" (15:5) reach the "waters of Nimrim" at the southern end of the Dead Sea, they find no water for themselves or the flocks they are trying to take with them—the "wealth" (15:7) of Moab. Thus, there was nothing else to do but to keep on pushing southward to the "Ravine of the Poplars," which is probably a reference to the Zered River, which formed the border between Moab and Edom.

"Dimon" in 15:9 is problematic because no such place is known. Dibon, on the other hand (cf. 15:2), was very well known as both a political and religious center. St. Jerome was the first to propose that there was either an intentional or an unintentional interchanging of the labial b in "Dibon" for the labial m. The fact that the Hebrew word for "blood" is dam could explain either kind of interchange. If that suggestion is correct, then Dibon, the bloody city, is standing for Moab, the part for the whole. The point of verse 9 is clear: In the end there is no place Moab can flee from the judgment of God.

If the southward flight suggested in chapter 15 is correct, it would be natural for the fugitives to have sought refuge in Edom. But in fact, that is not the case. The prophet knows that Moab's only hope is in the Lord and in the Messiah he has promised. Again we are reminded of the function of these prophecies against the nations. Should Israel and Judah trust in the nations in the face of the Assyrian threat? Why should they do that when

the only hope the nations have is the same hope Israel and Judah have, namely, the God of Jerusalem?

Isaiah 16:1—4a are the cries of the refugees for help. Verse 1 is perhaps the counsel they give to one another. Earlier Moab had had to provide sheep and lambs for the kings of Israel (2 Kings 3:4), so it would be natural for them to think of giving "lambs" as a gift to the king in Jerusalem ("the mount of the Daughter of Zion"). During biblical times the water level in the Dead Sea sometimes fell low enough that it was possible to ford the sea south of its midpoint and then to proceed up to Jerusalem through the "desert" of Judah. In any case the "refugees" beg permission to "hide" in Judah from the "destroyer," the plundering enemy (Isa. 16:3).

In 16:4b–5 Isaiah takes an opportunity to speak about the ultimate trust not only for the Moabites but for the whole world. This short statement is reminiscent not only of 11:1–16 but also of 9:1–7. Although his appearing will come long after this time when the Moabites are fleeing the Assyrians, a "man" will come out of "the house of David" and bring an end to oppression, destruction, and aggression. His throne will not be established on those rotten foundations but on the sure foundations of "love" and "faithfulness," the two chief characteristics of the Holy One of Israel. As a result, his government will be characterized by "justice" and "righteousness." Neither the Judeans nor the Moabites will survive to see him. Nevertheless, persons in both groups can put their trust in the God who made such a promise in their own day.

As he has already done several times in the book, Isaiah once again follows a familiar pattern: After a glimpse of that bright future hope, which should give people the basis for living lives of trust in dark hours, the prophet swings back to the grim present realities (16:6–13). Far from exercising humble trust, Moab is characterized by "pride" (v. 6) and idolatry (v. 12). She trusts herself and the gods she has made in her own image. The results are predictable for anyone who has read thus far in the book: humiliation, exhaustion, and loss. Those who attempt to exalt themselves only ensure their eventual downfall, and those who labor to manipulate the forces of this earth for their own sakes only exhaust themselves in futility.

Moab has been like a lush spreading vine. It spread northward all the way to Jazer in the land of Ammon, to the edges of "the desert" on the east, and to the shores of the "sea" (the Dead Sea) on the west. But now the beautiful vine has been trampled down and broken. The shouting and laughter that accompanied an abundant harvest "have been stilled" (v. 9) and "put [to] an end" (v. 10). They have been replaced with moaning and wailing.

Isaiah 16:14 commits the prophet to a test. He asserts that within three years of these words having been uttered, calculated as carefully as an indentured servant would calculate the days remaining on his servitude, the predictions will be fulfilled. There was a major destruction of Moab by the Assyrians in 715 B.C., so these words may have been first spoken in 718 B.C. In any case, the prophet is not merely speaking in generalities; he is speaking for the God of truth, who is the Lord of history, and he dares to stake both his reputation and God's on the fulfillment of what he says will happen.

Bridging Contexts

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY has given us numerous examples of the refugee experience, with people streaming out from the glorious cities of Europe or straggling out of a burning village in Vietnam. Photography has made the reality all the more vivid. I think particularly of three photographs. The first is of a woman in a long line of people fleeing the blitzkrieg in northern France. She is pushing a baby buggy filled with a strange collection of things: some clothes, a lamp, a book or two, and a lot of odds and ends. Her face is almost completely expressionless, but the tears are literally streaming from her eyes.

The second photograph is also from northern France. It is of a seemingly endless line of vehicles of all sorts abandoned by the side of the road. Clearly the tide of war had overtaken the persons involved, and they had left everything to run for their lives. There are luxury cars and farm carts with the horses dead in the shafts; there are milk trucks and children's wagons; there are bicycles and tractors. Falling out of all of them and scattered about on the ground, probably hurriedly pillaged by the soldiers, is all the detritus of life: clothes, books, paintings, furs, trinkets, everything we work so hard to acquire—all lost.

The third photograph is of a group of villagers on the steppes of Russia in the 1930s. The sky overhead is dark and threatening. All around them,

stretching to the horizon, is a flat, empty plain. Behind them, almost at the horizon, is a towering black column of smoke. Their homes and everything they possessed, except for the clothes on their backs, are going up in that smoke. On their faces is anguish and raw fear. They have been turned out into this empty landscape to die, and die they will—sooner rather than later.

Contemporary Significance

THERE IS NO HOPE in our achievements, whether they be the refined culture of Europe or the rough accourtements of a village on the steppes. None of our accomplishments can save us from the brutality of humans run amok. Even if our lives are lived out in peace, cruel Death will make us all refugees in the end, leaving all we have on the road to be pillaged by those who come after us.

We may be justly proud of the things we have done, but if that is the source of our eternal hope, our hope is small indeed. Perhaps the pyramids of Egypt will endure to the end of time, but what do they tell us about their builders? Next to nothing. We marvel at the intelligence that planned them, at the organization and effort that built them, at the immensity of the egos that demanded them, but there is nothing else. If Khufu was ever buried in the Great Pyramid, then every last thing he intended to endure to eternity, including his mummified body, has been stripped away. The burial chamber contains only one object, a huge, empty sarcophagus. Khufu is one more refugee on the road of eternity, having left all his possessions behind.

It is the same for us, whose accomplishments are a lot less stupendous than those ancient Egyptians. What will we leave behind when we take the road? Everything! And it will soon be scattered to the four winds. All our efforts to gain control of our environment, whether it be home or office or love of life, will only end in a final exhaustion. Later in this book, Isaiah says it eloquently, "Why [do you] labor on what does not satisfy?" (55:2). Like the Moabites, we tend to look in all the wrong directions for our hope. Then, when the world falls apart, as fall apart it must, there is nothing left but to wail, for all that is lost.

But in their extremity the Moabites did make one right move. They turned to Judah and not to Edom. Was it mere expedience? Did they recognize that Judah, for whatever reason, was in a more defensible

position than Edom? Or was it more than that? Did they recognize that Judah's God, Yahweh, was a different order of being than Chemosh and Molech? Did they recognize that Yahweh had both the power and the grace to deliver his people and those who allied themselves with them? In view of the rest of chapter 16, it does not seem likely their understanding was nearly that deep.

The same is true today. Many turn to the church for reasons they themselves understand poorly. Perhaps they want their children to have some "training in morality." Perhaps they have some vague childhood memories of people who seemed happy and fulfilled. Perhaps life has dealt them a series of crushing blows, and they have nowhere else to turn. Perhaps they just think it's a "good thing." Whatever the reasons, as Isaiah had only one word for the Moabites, so the church today has finally only one word to say to these "refugees." We may offer them programs to meet their "felt needs." We may help them get back on their feet again. We may offer them education and guidance. But in the end, the only final hope is to be found in the "man" of Isaiah 16:5—the man, Jesus Christ. Only in his eternal kingdom is there true freedom and justice.

That is so because his kingdom lasts forever. In this world the only certainty is death and loss. But in the goodness and light and fertility that may be found in the world, we see the promise that death and loss are not intended to be the final realities. So, if we help people to put shattered lives back together and that is all we do, we have only staved off the final loss for a few more days or years. But if we bring them into the throne room of heaven and help them to bow in submission before the Lamb slain from the foundation of the earth, we have given them a surety against all loss for all time.

That hope is not in our accomplishments but in his. He has forever solved the problems of justice and freedom by taking into himself the consequences of all our pride and idolatry, which have produced wrong and oppression. In place of the world's seemingly endless tears and loss, he has given joy and abundance. If we wait for a day yet to come to see him enthroned in all his glory, we can still live our days here on earth with confidence and rest.

Isaiah 17:1–11

AN ORACLE CONCERNING Damascus:

"See, Damascus will no longer be a city but will become a heap of ruins. ²The cities of Aroer will be deserted and left to flocks, which will lie down, with no one to make them afraid. ³The fortified city will disappear from Ephraim, and royal power from Damascus; the remnant of Aram will be like the glory of the Israelites," declares the LORD Almighty.

4"In that day the glory of Jacob will fade; the fat of his body will waste away. ⁵It will be as when a reaper gathers the standing grain and harvests the grain with his arm as when a man gleans heads of grain in the Valley of Rephaim. ⁶Yet some gleanings will remain,

as when an olive tree is beaten, leaving two or three olives on the topmost branches. four or five on the fruitful boughs,"

declares the LORD, the God of Israel.

⁷In that day men will look to their Maker and turn their eyes to the Holy One of Israel.

⁸They will not look to the altars, the work of their hands,

and they will have no regard for the Asherah poles and the incense altars their fingers have made.

⁹In that day their strong cities, which they left because of the Israelites, will be like places abandoned to thickets and undergrowth. And all will be desolation.

10 You have forgotten God your Savior; you have not remembered the Rock, your fortress.
Therefore, though you set out the finest plants and plant imported vines,
11 though on the day you set them out, you make them grow, and on the morning when you plant them, you bring them to bud, yet the harvest will be as nothing in the day of disease and incurable pain.

Original Meaning

THERE IS CONSIDERABLE debate over the structure of the materials in Isaiah 17 and 18, for two principal reasons. (1) There is no oracle formula at the beginning of chapter 18. All of the other judgments pronounced against specific nations in this section begin with the words "an oracle concerning," with the name of the nation following. But chapter 18 begins with the words, "Woe to the land of whirring wings along the rivers of Cush [Ethiopia]." (2) Moreover, the materials between 17:12 and 18:7 do not sound at all like a judgment on a specific nation. Rather, they speak of the sovereignty of God over all nations. The fact that 17:12 begins with "Woe" (NIV, "Oh"), as 18:1 does, seems to further support the idea that 17:12–18:7

forms a single thought unit (although these verses may have been originally separate literary units).

The fact that 17:1–11, although labeled "an oracle concerning Damascus," is actually largely addressed to Israel may explain why 17:12–18:7 is appended to the oracle. It was the attack of Israel and Aram on Judah that precipitated this entire crisis of faith and trust. It was because Judah turned to the nations of the world for its help in that moment instead of to God that the whole issue of the judgment of the nations is being discussed in chapters 13–23. Thus, it may be that the prophet sees the mention of Aram and Damascus as a good opportunity to recap the larger truth that these chapters are illustrating: All the nations of the world are subject to Yahweh, so Judah should neither fear nor trust any of them.²

Isaiah 17:1–3 speaks of the fall of Aram (Syria). The nation is represented by its capital city, Damascus (v. 1), and by the city of Aroer (v. 2), which was located on the Arnon River in Moab at the farthest southern extent of Aram's control. These cities will be reduced to "ruins," where "flocks" will feed. In verse 3 the reader is prepared for the change of subject to Israel in verse 4 by the mention of "Ephraim" and by the statement that Aram's glory will be as fading as that of Israel.

The fading glory of "Jacob" then becomes the main topic in the rest of the segment (17:4–11). It begins with an extended comparison of Israel's fate to that of a harvested field or orchard (vv. 4–6). Just as only a few stray stalks are left in a grain field or a few wizened or unripe fruits are left on the trees, so there will only be a remnant left of all that Israel once boasted of. As in the name of Isaiah's son, Shear-Jashub (see comments on 7:1–3), the concept of the remnant is double-edged: Hardly anything of the nation will remain, though there *will* be something left.

Thus, 17:7–8 speak of that future day when the Israelites will be purified by judgment and will turn their backs on their idols.³ The key emphasis is on worshiping "their Maker" (v. 7) instead of what "their fingers have made" (v. 8). Idolatry is a reversal of reality. Why should we worship our own works? Should we not rather worship the One who made us?⁴ According to these verses, a day will come when the remnant will finally abandon idolatry. This, of course, had occurred by the time of Christ, when the Jews had become almost fanatically anti-idolatrous.

In 17:9–11 Isaiah once more demonstrates his familiar pattern. Yes, there is the hope that in the future the trust in the human creatures of idolatry will be abandoned. But between then and the present, there is the awful reality of judgment. Like the cities of Aram, the cities of Israel will be "abandoned" and desolate (v. 9). Why? Because they have "forgotten God," who is the only hope for deliverance and refuge (v. 10). Instead of trusting the one who delivered them from Egypt and gave them the good land in which they live, they trust in their own strength and cunning.

Isaiah 17:10b–11 express this again (like 5:1–7) in imagery that is familiar to these largely agricultural people. They have done everything that their human strength can do. They have purchased the finest "imported" vines (v. 10b), perhaps an allusion to alliances with foreign nations. But even if they are such skillful agrarians that they could cause the plants to bud and bear fruit in a single day (something they obviously cannot do), the harvest would be worthless. Judgment is coming and cannot be averted by human skill. The best of human effort is not enough to solve the human problem. Someday the remnant of Israel will learn that fact.

Bridging Contexts

It is amazing how often religion based on human effort degenerates into the crudest fascination with sexuality. It was true in Canaan, it was true in Ephesus, it was true in Rome, and it is true today. The harvest we reap is one of disease, degeneration, and perversion.

But if we think about the issues more closely, it is perhaps not so amazing after all. Once we have abandoned the worship of the Maker, there is only one outlet for our inveterate need to worship something outside of ourselves. We must worship what we have made. But whence comes creativity? Ultimately, we worship the creative powers within ourselves. And since mere creativity as a concept is far too abstract and bland and since we who were made to worship the Transcendent One cannot live without mystery, the mystery of sexuality comes to rule our lives.

Another truth this passage teaches is one that occurs again and again in Isaiah. Yes, the coming judgment will be severe, but God has as his goal not the destruction of the nation but its purification. There will be a remnant, and that remnant will learn the lessons of destruction. They will recognize

their own responsibility for the disaster and will turn back to God, looking to him and not to the products of their own skill and creativity. They will recognize that God has not failed them but that their own efforts to save themselves have.

Contemporary Significance

THE EPIDEMIC OF PORNOGRAPHY today is a contemporary manifestation of the age-old problem. Having forgotten our Maker and what he teaches us about the surrender of our needs to him for him to supply, we become lost in self-indulgence, lack of discipline, and a spiraling inability to find stimulation in the normal and ordinary. Thus, we descend into more of the bizarre and destructive until a normal and healthy sexual experience becomes impossible. Then we hear the media "pooh-poohing" these concerns as merely the censorious pratings of prudes, people who want to abridge the "first amendment rights" of others.

It is tragic that millions of dollars can be raised to combat pollution of the physical environment while the much more serious pollution of the spiritual environment proceeds apace with influential voices raised to defend it. Those who work with young boys know what is happening around us and are not at all surprised at the geometric rise in sexual violence in our society. The idea that "free expression" will solve all our societal ills is one result of having forgotten God. It is one thing for a person to have the right to express his or her opinions, even if those opinions are wrong or perverse. It is quite another thing for a person to have the right to market those "opinions" to the vulnerable, making huge fortunes while destroying the fabric of the society.

To paraphrase the prophet, we may be able to import the finest digital technology and use the most professional skills in photography, we may have a website up in a day and have ten thousand "hits," we may make millions of dollars, but "the harvest will be as nothing in the day of disease and incurable pain." Instead of a society that is genuinely fruitful, because people are turned outward and are able to sublimate their desires to accomplish worthwhile goals, we will have a society that is wholly given over to pleasing itself and is ultimately barren.

Isaiah 17:12-18:7

12OH, THE RAGING of many nations—
they rage like the raging sea!
Oh, the uproar of the peoples—
they roar like the roaring of great
waters!

¹³Although the peoples roar like the roar of surging waters, when he rebukes them they flee far away,

driven before the wind like chaff on the hills,

like tumbleweed before a gale.

14In the evening, sudden terror!
 Before the morning, they are gone!
 This is the portion of those who loot us, the lot of those who plunder us.

18:1 Woe to the land of whirring wings along the rivers of Cush,
 2 which sends envoys by sea in papyrus boats over the water.

Go, swift messengers, to a people tall and smooth-skinned, to a people feared far and wide, an aggressive nation of strange speech, whose land is divided by rivers.

³All you people of the world, you who live on the earth, when a banner is raised on the mountains, you will see it, and when a trumpet sounds, you will hear it. ⁴This is what the LORD says to me: "I will remain quiet and will look on from my dwelling place, like shimmering heat in the sunshine, like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest." ⁵For, before the harvest, when the blossom and the flower becomes a ripening grape, he will cut off the shoots with pruning knives. and cut down and take away the spreading branches. ⁶They will all be left to the mountain birds of prev and to the wild animals: the birds will feed on them all summer, the wild animals all winter.

⁷At that time gifts will be brought to the LORD Almighty

from a people tall and smooth-skinned, from a people feared far and wide, an aggressive nation of strange speech, whose land is divided by rivers—

the gifts will be brought to Mount Zion, the place of the Name of the LORD Almighty.

Original Meaning

As Motyer correctly notes, whatever the original settings of 17:12–14 and 18:1–7 may have been, they now function together to address the topic "who actually rules the world and whose purposes will in the end be accomplished?" According to 17:12–14, it is unnecessary to become

frightened because of the raging of the nations, for they will soon be gone. Isaiah 18:1–3 says that instead of envoys coming from the Ethiopian king of Egypt to invite Judah to join a coalition against Assyria, envoys should go to the Ethiopians to tell them what God says. A direct message from God appears in 18:4–7. While the nations roil about like the waves of the sea, God quietly waits and will take action at just the right moment, cutting off the oppressing nations and leaving their corpses on the mountains.

The Raging of the Nations (17:12–14)

IN LANGUAGE REMINISCENT of Psalm 46, the prophet compares the nations to the raging sea. The waves crash and roar with frightening power, and it seems as though they are the ultimate reality with which we must come to terms. But in fact, that is not the case. As Psalm 2 says, it is the One who sits in the heavens who is the ultimate reality. Before his breath, the nations are no more substantial than bits of "chaff" or a rolling "tumbleweed" (Isa. 17:13; see also 11:4). They have their day, but suddenly night falls, and in the morning nothing is left of what seemed so enduring (17:14).

In other words, Isaiah is attempting to get his people to focus beyond apparent realities and onto the One who is reality in himself. The nations may plan to "plunder" and "loot" God's people, but whatever they may think, they do not control their own destinies (cf. 14:24–27).

Messengers for Cush (18:1–3)

ABOUT 740 B.C. the Ethiopian Piankhy (also known as Piye) took over Egypt from the previous Libyan rulers. He along with his successor Shabako (715–702) brought a new energy to Egyptian affairs. Most likely both of them attempted to cement alliances with various surrounding countries in order to counter the Assyrian threat posed by both Sargon and Sennacherib.² We can imagine the stir made in Jerusalem by the tall, regal-looking Ethiopian envoys,³ who came up the Mediterranean coast in their strange "papyrus" craft (18:2). But Isaiah says that envoys should instead go to Ethiopia⁴ to tell them to beware of the true Ruler of the world. It is his battle flag and his war trumpet for which they should be on the alert (18:3).

A Message from God (18:4–7)

COMPARED TO THE marching of armies and the comings and goings of ambassadors, God's activity often seems unnoticeable. But in a masterful way the prophet reminds his hearers that just because something does not draw much attention to itself does not mean it is powerless.

He uses two comparisons to make his point: the sun and the dew (18:4). Neither comes with fanfare or pageantry; they are simply present and inescapable. So is God. And in his harvest he will cut down the enemy nations like unproductive branches on a vine (18:5–6). He is the reality, not they. This means that instead of the Judeans giving the Ethiopians a large sum of money for their help, the Judeans should remember that the day will come when the Ethiopians will be giving gifts to the God of Jerusalem (18:7; cf. 2:1–3; 60:10–14).

Bridging Contexts

In the MIDST of earth's struggles, it is sometimes hard to believe that God is really on the throne. For instance, suppose a modern-day Isaiah had stood up on the streets of London in the spring of 1942 and said that Germany and Japan, who at that moment ruled fully half the world between them, would be completely powerless in just a little over three years. He would probably have been laughed to scorn. Yet he would have been completely correct. Despite the energy, intellect, and military power of those two great nations, they were swept away. God is the one reality who does not change or fade away. He is the One with whom we must come to terms.

Contemporary Significance

IN PSALM 2:1–4 we read these words,

Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One. "Let us break their chains," they say,

"and throw off their fetters."

The One enthroned in heaven laughs; The Lord scoffs at them.

The nations of the earth may take many drastic steps to elevate themselves to positions of absolute power. But God has kept that power for himself, and all the efforts by the nations will be as futile as a two-year-old's straining against the restraints in a car-seat. To the child this is a matter of serious rebellion. To the adults looking on, it is merely laughable. Psalm 46:6 makes a similar point: "Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts."

Created beings are not the final reality; only the Creator is. We may see the nations of earth boiling about. We grow anxious as we see kingdoms fall. But the psalmist and Isaiah invite us to remember that all the power of the nations is derivative. Despite anything they do, the basic conditions of life are unchanged. But God is the One who established those conditions. Having brought the universe into existence with a word, he can just as easily put it out of existence with a word (cf. Isa. 11:4; Rev. 19:15). That is indeed power—power the nations of the earth can only dream about (cf. Isa. 40:15–17.)

When we think of the prediction that the Ethiopians will come to Jerusalem bearing gifts to the Lord Almighty (18:7), we remember the Ethiopian eunuch who received the Christian interpretation of Isaiah 53 in Acts 8:26–39 and became a believer. He represents all those other nations who have brought their gifts to God in Jerusalem, both before the birth of Christ and even more since. Isaiah has the long view that sees the reality behind what the other people of his day only imagine to be reality.

Isaiah 19:1–20:6

AN ORACLE CONCERNING Egypt:

See, the LORD rides on a swift cloud and is coming to Egypt. The idols of Egypt tremble before him, and the hearts of the Egyptians melt within them.

²"I will stir up Egyptian against Egyptian

brother will fight against brother, neighbor against neighbor, city against city, kingdom against kingdom.

³The Egyptians will lose heart, and I will bring their plans to nothing; they will consult the idols and the spirits of the dead,

the mediums and the spiritists.

⁴I will hand the Egyptians over to the power of a cruel master, and a fierce king will rule over them," declares the Lord, the LORD Almighty.

⁵The waters of the river will dry up, and the riverbed will be parched and dry.

⁶The canals will stink; the streams of Egypt will dwindle and dry up.

The reeds and rushes will wither,

⁷also the plants along the Nile,
at the mouth of the river.

Every sown field along the Nile will become parched, will blow away and be no more.

⁸The fishermen will groan and lament, all who cast hooks into the Nile; those who throw nets on the water will pine away.

⁹Those who work with combed flax will despair,

the weavers of fine linen will lose hope.

¹⁰The workers in cloth will be dejected, and all the wage earners will be sick at heart.

11 The officials of Zoan are nothing but fools;

the wise counselors of Pharaoh give senseless advice.

How can you say to Pharaoh,
"I am one of the wise men,
a disciple of the ancient kings"?

12Where are your wise men now? Let them show you and make known what the LORD Almighty has planned against Egypt.

13The officials of Zoan have become fools, the leaders of Memphis are deceived; the cornerstones of her peoples

the cornerstones of her peoples have led Egypt astray.

¹⁴The LORD has poured into them a spirit of dizziness;

they make Egypt stagger in all that she does,

as a drunkard staggers around in his vomit.

¹⁵There is nothing Egypt can do—

head or tail, palm branch or reed.

¹⁶In that day the Egyptians will be like women. They will shudder with fear at the uplifted hand that the LORD Almighty raises against them. ¹⁷And the land of Judah will bring terror to the Egyptians; everyone to whom Judah is mentioned will be terrified, because of what the LORD Almighty is planning against them.

¹⁸In that day five cities in Egypt will speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the LORD Almighty. One of them will be called the City of Destruction.

¹⁹In that day there will be an altar to the LORD in the heart of Egypt, and a monument to the LORD at its border. ²⁰It will be a sign and witness to the LORD Almighty in the land of Egypt. When they cry out to the LORD because of their oppressors, he will send them a savior and defender, and he will rescue them. ²¹So the LORD will make himself known to the Egyptians, and in that day they will acknowledge the LORD. They will worship with sacrifices and grain offerings; they will make vows to the LORD and keep them. ²²The LORD will strike Egypt with a plague; he will strike them and heal them. They will turn to the LORD, and he will respond to their pleas and heal them.

²³In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. ²⁴In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. ²⁵The LORD Almighty will bless them, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance."

^{20:1}In the year that the supreme commander, sent by Sargon king of Assyria, came to Ashdod and attacked and captured it—²at that time the LORD spoke through Isaiah son of Amoz. He said to him, "Take off the sackcloth from your body and the sandals from your feet." And he did so, going around stripped and barefoot.

³Then the LORD said, "Just as my servant Isaiah has gone stripped and barefoot for three years, as a sign and portent against Egypt and Cush, ⁴so the king of Assyria will lead away stripped and barefoot the Egyptian captives and Cushite exiles, young and old, with buttocks bared—to Egypt's shame. ⁵Those who trusted in Cush and boasted in Egypt will be afraid and put to shame. ⁶In that day the people who live on this coast will say, 'See what has happened to those we relied on, those we fled to for help and deliverance from the king of Assyria! How then can we escape?""

Original Meaning

THIS ORACLE CONCERNING Egypt falls into three parts. The first part (19:1–15) predicts Egypt's fall, showing that none of the great gifts that this nation has historically relied on can save her from the coming judgment. The second part (19:16–25) speaks of the way in which after judgment, Egypt will one day turn to worship Israel's God. The third part (20:1–6), true to form, reverts to the present and the certainty of Egypt's judgment. In all of this the reiteration of the theme of this part of the book is clear. Why would one trust Egypt since she cannot save herself and since she will one day turn to worship the very God Israel is now fearing to trust?

Prediction of Egypt's Fall (19:1–15)

THIS FIRST POEM falls into three stanzas of nearly equal length: verses 1–4, 5–10, and 11–15. Each stanza deals with a different feature of Egypt in which the Egyptian people might be inclined to trust: the gods of Egypt, the

Nile (the river of Egypt), and the fabled wisdom of Egypt. Each of these is shown to fail, leaving the Egyptians disgraced and despairing.

Isaiah 19:1–4. In several places Israelite writers appropriate the imagery of the Canaanite storm god Baal to say that the Lord rides upon the clouds (e.g., Deut. 33:26; Ps. 68:4; 104:3). So here it is not the Assyrian armies from the north whom the Egyptians should fear, but the God from the north, whose chariots are the clouds (Isa. 19:1). Compared to him, the multitudinous "idols" of Egypt (19:1, 3) are utterly helpless.

Certainly Egypt was the most polytheistic of all the peoples of the ancient Near East; they compare favorably for sheer number of gods with modern Hinduism. But all those gods, along with the spiritist practices associated with the polytheistic worldview, are helpless before the living God. They cannot prevent the kind of anarchy that historically occurred in Egypt when the central government collapsed (19:2). The Egyptians were an orderly people who hated change of all sorts. As a result, when rapid change came, they tended to "lose heart" (19:3), and order quickly gave way to disorder. Many possibilities exist for the identity of the "cruel master" of 19:4, from Piankhy the Ethiopian to Ashurbanipal the Assyrian, but the point is that this person will only rule at the sufferance of Yahweh, the God of Israel.

Isaiah 19:5–10. The Egyptians referred to their land as "the gift of the Nile." That is literally true. If it were not for the Nile River, Egypt would be simply an eastern extension of the Sahara Desert. For centuries the Nile has with clocklike regularity brought irrigation water and new topsoil to the land. Because of that water and fertility, the land has produced abundant crops, which in turn have made possible the leisure necessary to develop a high culture. In addition to its agricultural significance, the river has been a route of commerce and a military highway. Thus, Egypt and the Nile are inseparable.

But Isaiah says that it is foolish to put one's trust in any natural resource, even one as dependable as the Nile. Thus, he envisions a day when the mighty river will run dry, along with all the activities dependent on it: agriculture (19:7), fisheries (19:8), and flax-making (19:9–10).

Isaiah 19:11–15. Even more than its complex religion and its mighty river, Egypt was known in the ancient world for its wisdom and culture. But Isaiah says all of that will prove helpless in the face of God's plan.

Although a connection cannot be proven, it is tempting to think that there is an allusion to the Joseph narrative in the inability of all the Egyptian wise men to tell the pharaoh what the Lord has "planned" for Egypt (19:12). Since they cannot even do that, Isaiah wonders how they dare to call themselves "wise" (19:11).

The language of 19:14 is like that found in chapter 28, where the prophet condemns the leaders of Judah for giving foolish counsel (cf. 28:7–8). Isaiah 19:15 uses the same language as 9:14 to describe the leadership of the land. As there, "head or tail, palm branch or reed" are figures of totality, like the English "top to bottom." Egypt's entire collection of counselors is helpless to discern what Israel's God is going to do with them and their land.

Egypt's Coming Worship of God (19:16–25)

THERE ARE NOT only negative reasons why Egypt should not be trusted, but there is also a positive reason why trusting in Egypt is foolish: The Egyptians will one day turn to Judah's God! Four different prose statements are made here, each headed by the phrase "in that day" (19:16, 18, 19, 23). This phrase does not refer to some specific twenty-four-hour period but to a more general time in the future. A good English equivalent is "at that time."

At certain points in the future events will take place in God's providence that will forever alter the outlook of Egypt. The Egyptians will move from fear of the judging God to trust in the delivering God whom Judah now hesitates to trust. It is not necessary to believe that all these events will occur at the same time or even in the sequence given here. The prophet is only saying that future events will vindicate the counsel he is giving to Judah.

Verses 16–17 form a transition in that they are in the prose form of what follows, while their message is more like that of 19:1–15. Once more Isaiah emphasizes the "plan" of God (19:12, 17). "Plan," "counselors," and "advice" (19:11) all share the Hebrew root *y's*, so there is probably an intentional play on the foolish "plans" that the unwise counselors of the pharaoh have given. Because of that foolish counsel, the Egyptians will be plunged into terror when the God of Judah acts. Because it is Judah's God who is at work, the very name of Judah will frighten the people of Egypt.

But just as God's ultimate goal is not to destroy his people, neither is it his ultimate goal to destroy the people of Egypt. Isaiah 19:18–25 shows that his ultimate purpose is to bring them to worship him together with Israel and Assyria. This is an amazing thought, showing the truly universal character of Old Testament religion. Although at various points Judah is spoken of as triumphing over such perennial enemies as Egypt and Assyria, that is not the end of the story. The ultimate vision of the Hebrew prophets, first seen in Isaiah 2 (and in Mic. 4), is that Israel will be a blessing to the nations as it leads them to the one true God. All the peoples will worship him together (see also Isa. 25:6–9).

The hope of Egypt is expressed in three movements. (1) Several cities³ will speak Hebrew ("the language of Canaan") and swear allegiance to the Lord (19:18). If the emendation accepted by many scholars is correct,⁴ one of the five cities will actually be the home city of the cult of the sun god, Re.

(2) The Lord will be worshiped in Egypt, with an "altar" in the center of the land and a "monument" on the border (19:19). Probably not just one altar and one memorial are in Isaiah's mind here; rather, these represent many worship centers where, like Abraham (Gen. 12:8) and Jacob (28:18), the building of an altar or the setting up of memorial pillars was a way of acknowledging God's presence and of thanking him for his care.

The language of Isaiah 19:20–22 appears to have been consciously chosen to demonstrate that Egypt will share the same kind of relationship with the Lord as Israel did. They will be subject to the same kinds of divine discipline ("oppressors," v. 20; "plague," v. 22), and they will have available to them the same kinds of divine deliverance ("savior," v. 20; "heal," v. 22). He will reveal himself to them, and they will "acknowledge" (lit., "know") him.

(3) The final expression of God's positive plans for Egypt is, if anything, even more shocking than the previous two. He is not merely going to deliver Egypt and Israel from the Assyrian oppressors, he is going to join the three countries together in the common worship of the Lord! Egypt and Assyria will travel back and forth to one another's countries, not to attack one another or to strike shrewd business deals but to worship Israel's God. Between the two poles of northeast (Assyria) and southwest (Egypt), Israel will fulfill the function that God promised to Abraham for his descendants

(Gen. 12:3). They will be a blessing to the world, a means whereby the blessings of God can come to all peoples, a means whereby the election of Israel is extended to everyone ("Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork," Isa. 19:25).

Certainty of Egypt's Judgment (20:1–6)

THIS FINAL SECTION represents two of the common features of the prophecy of Isaiah: following up hopeful promises of the distant future with a discussion of coming judgment in the near future, and a graphic illustration of a point just made in a more discursive form. Isaiah is called to act out the coming defeat and exile of Egypt. Why would Judah want to trust a nation that will shortly fall to the enemy from whom they are promising to protect Judah?

There is uncertainty whether Isaiah is fully nude during this three-year period. The Hebrew word (NIV, "stripped") can connote either full or partial nudity, such as only wearing a loincloth, which would leave the "buttocks bared" (20:4). It is hard to imagine that the Judean community would have permitted full nudity for this long a period, though perhaps prophets were permitted kinds of behavior that would be otherwise forcibly prohibited. In any case, Isaiah is acting out what is going to happen when the Assyrians strip the captive Egyptians and march them off into captivity. Not only will Egypt fail those who trust in her, as Ashdod did, but she will ultimately not even be able to save herself.

This is the only recorded example of Isaiah's performing symbolic actions, something more common in certain of the other prophets, notably Ezekiel (see Ezek. 4:1–17; 5:1–4; 12:1–20; see also Hos. 1–3). These actions reflect a peculiarly Hebrew understanding of the relation between symbol and reality. In the pagan view of the continuity of all things (see comments in the introduction), the symbol and the reality were identical. Thus, what was done to the symbol was necessarily done to reality. To act something out was to bring it to pass. By contrast, in Greek philosophical understanding, which has shaped modern thinking, there is no necessary relation between the symbol and the reality. Symbols may be freely alternated in whatever way seems to aid communication, and the reality is not affected in any way.

The biblical understanding stands somewhere between these extremes. While the symbol is not identical with reality, it does "partake" of the reality. Thus, certain symbols have a uniquely powerful ability to depict and evoke a given reality. As such, they cannot be freely alternated with other symbols. But at the same time, there is never the sense that because the prophet has performed some symbolic action, the corresponding reality *must* occur. The symbol has evocative power, not causal power. The law of transcendence has forever broken that understanding of causation.

The repetition of words for "trust" in the final two verses of this passage remind us again that the central issue throughout this section (Isa. 13–23) continues to be the fallacy of trusting the nations instead of the Lord.

Bridging Contexts

THIS PASSAGE IS about three things: the inadequacy of all the things of earth when it comes to giving full meaning to life, God's intention to save the whole earth, and the inevitable failure of all false hopes.

The inadequacy of the things of earth. There are three things we are tempted to trust when it comes to making sense of life: human wisdom, the natural environment, and the spirit world. Each of them is rooted in the creation and therefore each is drastically limited. But if we have rejected the possibility of a transcendent Creator, they are the best we have. Idolatry is in essence a combination of all three as it uses the best of human intelligence to imagine how the spirit world and the natural environment are interrelated. Specifically, this interrelationship is imagined in such a way as to maximize the human control of these forces. In doing so, we think that will give us the maximum of security, pleasure, and comfort.

But in the end such control is only possible if the worldview of continuity is correct. In this view all things that exist are part of each other. Thus, what is done in the human realm is automatically replicated in the divine and natural realms unless the demonic has somehow ruptured the links. The Bible tells us this is a false premise. God is not the world, and what is done here does not automatically affect him. Furthermore, there is a break between the human world and nature. Humans are not apes with the capacity for speech. We are uniquely created.

Thus, unless the Creator reveals the meaning of life to us, it is beyond our capacity to either find it or to create it. Our capacity will lead us in exactly the wrong direction, the direction of continuity, when the truth is transcendence. Thus, as Isaiah says, our wisdom becomes foolishness, nature regularly turns on us, and the spirit world is increasingly peopled with figures of horror and terror who cannot help us, only hurt us.

Salvation for the entire earth. If it is surprising that little Judah insists that its God is the only God in all the earth, it is even more surprising to discover, as here, that they also believe their God intends to save the whole earth. Other nations who believed their god was superior to all the others typically spoke of that god as dominating all the earth and making his own particular people rulers of the whole thing. Thus, it is not surprising to find some of those sentiments present in the Old Testament; it would be more surprising if we did not. That attitude was simply part of the mental furniture of that day and time.

But what *is* surprising is the idea that the eventual purpose of God's rule is not domination but salvation. This view is consistent with the revelation of God the Hebrews have received. This sole God of all the earth is not like the other gods, who were self-serving and petty; he is self-giving and gracious. Since he is the only God, he will treat all peoples who repent, even Egyptians and Assyrians, in the same way as he has treated his own people.

The failure of false hopes. The haunting popular song of the 1970s "Is That All There Is?" illustrates the third theme of this passage. The singer speaks of the anticipation of love, freedom, and accomplishment, but she is always disappointed with the reality, saying in each case, "Is that all there is?" In the end, she contemplates suicide but is afraid to carry it out, because she is afraid she will end up saying once more, "Is that all there is?"

Somehow in this world, the reality usually falls short of the expectation. Why? As Blaise Pascal has said, there is a God-shaped vacuum in each of us, and when we attempt to fill that vacuum with anything less than God, the result must always be disappointing. But if that vacuum is filled with its rightful resident, we will stop expecting earthly things to fill the void and will be able to enjoy each of them for their limited selves. There is great joy

in learning; there is great joy in nature; there is great joy in spiritual experience—but only when none of them is made ultimate.

Contemporary Significance

FULFILLMENT OF PROPHECY. This is a convenient place to talk about the fulfillment of prophecy. How much of what Isaiah says about Egypt (and the other nations) should we expect to be literally fulfilled? At the outset, let me lay down some important parameters.

(1) If there is a transcendent God who reveals himself in history, then the possibility of genuine predictive prophecy must be allowed for. Most of modern scholarship, operating on the premise of uniformity, denies such a possibility. Uniformity presupposes that whatever happens today has always happened this way, and we interpret the past in the light of the processes we see happening in the present. Note glacial dating in archaeology as an example. The deposits of various ice ages can be detected, especially in Europe. A system of dating has been developed based on the assumption that glaciers have always grown and contracted at the same rates they do today. Interestingly, increasing numbers of secular scientists now accept the likelihood that there were periods of sudden and catastrophic changes on the earth, but that has done little to change the faith of scholars in the theory of uniformity.

When uniformity is applied to prophecy, the results are obvious. Is there anyone today who genuinely knows the future? No. There are many who claim to do so, but when they and their predictions are scrutinized carefully, the results are always disappointing. They are either flatly wrong, or they miss the really big events (what fortune-teller predicted the break-up of the Soviet Union more than a few months in advance?), or they are so ambiguous as to be meaningless. People only know things after they have happened. So, on the basis of uniformity, it is said that this is the way things have always been. The biblical prophets were supposedly no different from anyone today. Contemporary events gave the "prophets" ideas, and the "prophets" tried to make it appear that God had predicted the event before it actually occurred.

But the Bible is premised on something other than uniformity. If the Bible is right at all, then there was a history of salvation when God was

uniquely active in the world. He intervened in that period in unique ways to disclose himself to the world. The culmination of that disclosure was in Jesus Christ. Thus, the books that give the authoritative interpretation of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are the culmination of that process of self-disclosure. To say that there has never been any other kind of self-disclosure by God than the type that occurs now is to disbelieve what the Bible claims about itself and the process that brought the Bible about. If one grants the truth of the biblical teaching about God and about the way in which he revealed himself, then genuine predictive prophecy must be considered to be a possibility. This means it is impossible to dismiss the reference to the five cities speaking the "language of Canaan" as a postexilic reference to the Jewish communities that existed in Egypt at the time of the writing.

(2) The second parameter is on the opposite end. This one has to do with understanding the purpose of prophecy. Prophecy is not given so that those hearing it can map out a timetable of future events. That was what pagan prophecy sought to do. Biblical prophecy is different. In the Bible prediction is put into a context that radically changes the significance of the prediction. Biblical prophecy is a call to obey God revealed in the terms of the covenant. In this new context prediction has two purposes: to verify that the God who is calling for obedience is indeed the God of the universe, who knows all things and is worthy of obedience, and to give confidence to the listeners that they can dare to obey because this God has the entire future in his hands.

Thus, much of the modern fascination with biblical prophecy is foreign to the purposes for which the prophecy exists. Instead of promoting moral obedience and social justice, it promotes spiritual elitism and arrogance. It also promotes a certain "slipperiness." It is fascinating to watch people who have been "interpreting" biblical predictions for thirty years or more keep readjusting their interpretations as time passes. Their continued ability to draw crowds is primarily a testimony to the interpreter's facile imagination and the gullibility of many Christians. The fact is that the biblical data are complex enough that an imaginative and diligent student can create a plausible case for almost any scenario.

(3) This latter point establishes the need for a third parameter, to be established in the center. It is dangerous to attempt to define in advance

exactly how a biblical prediction is going to be fulfilled. For instance, it would have been natural for someone reading Micah 5:2 to say that the Messiah would have to be born and raised in Bethlehem. This may have been partly behind Nathaniel's remark, "Can anything good come from [Nazareth]?" (John 1:46). How can Jesus be the Messiah if he comes from Nazareth? Everybody knows the Messiah comes from Bethlehem. Was the scriptural prediction incorrect? No, but it was not fulfilled as one might expect. This means that we need to be both open and tentative about how scriptural prophecy is going to be fulfilled and about how literally it will be fulfilled.

Thus, shall we expect at some point in the future to hear of five Egyptian cities where Hebrew is the official language? Shall we expect an altar to the living God to be erected there and a superhighway extending from Cairo to Baghdad by way of Tel Aviv? To all of these I answer, "I don't know"—and you should be suspicious of anyone who says he or she does know.

Will the promises recorded here be fulfilled? Yes, they will. In fact, from one point of view they already have been fulfilled. For the first half of the first millennium, Egypt was one of the major centers of Christian, that is, biblical, faith. Believers from Egypt and Mesopotamia journeyed to Jerusalem to worship the God of the Bible. Perhaps there will be a more literal fulfillment yet to come. But we should be careful to avoid two extremes. On the one hand we should not say that the only possible fulfillment is a literal one according to my, or my group's, definition of "literal." On the other hand, we should not say that the spiritual teaching of these predictions is all that is important. If God is God, then history is still his arena to act in as he chooses.

Conflict in worldviews. This oracle in Isaiah 19–20 highlights the conflict between two worldviews: the biblical one and the pagan one. For many years, we in the Western world have argued that there are three worldviews: the transcendent, the pagan, and the a-religious. We have argued that it is possible to take a purely mechanistic view of life without taking into account the spiritual. But the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians were more acute observers than we. They understood that there is a spiritual component in existence that cannot be ignored. The only issue is how to relate to it. The pagan view says we can relate to the spiritual realm through magical manipulation and participation. But this

view has a number of deadly implications, all of which become clearer and clearer as we in the West fall back into it.

Paul's insight in Romans 1 cannot be improved upon. He demonstrates the inevitable confusion that comes to the one who refuses to recognize that there is a God outside of himself or herself who cannot be manipulated by anything he or she does. Once we deny God is outside of the world, then the only alternative is that the divine *is* the world. That in turn means that the world is without purpose or goal and that we can never transcend the cycles of existence. Individuals no longer matter and the only wisdom is utilitarianism: "If it works, it's good." There is no morality except power, and salvation is nothing more than self-actualization. The thought that one can transcend one's background or conditioning is not only laughable, it is evil.

By contrast, transcendence speaks of a world where we can move forward out of the conditioning of the past into a bright new day where potentials can become reality. We are not locked into the past, nor are we doomed to repeat its failures. By surrendering to and trusting the God who is not the world, we can overcome the world (cf. 1 John 5:4–5). Not only can we know the way we were meant to live, we can find grace through surrender to live that life. The wisdom of paganism in its worship of nature and its deification of humanity has failed and will continue to fail. But the God who is beyond time and space yet is everywhere present will be worshiped from sea to sea.

Coming to God. One of the consequences of the loss of the transcendent vision is the assertion that all roads lead to God. Of course, if the world is god and if there is no such thing as divine self-revelation, that is manifestly true. But both of those premises are false, profoundly false. The Bible is the most inclusive book in the world, but it achieves that distinction by being the most exclusive one. Can the Egyptians find God? Can they worship at his feet? Or is he the exclusive possession of the Israelites? No, he is not the possession of the Israelites. The gospel word "Whoever will may come" is gladly, gloriously true. Christ has died for all persons everywhere; he is "not wanting anyone to perish" (2 Peter 3:9).

But *how* do they come? Here is the issue. Do they come in their own way, or do they come in God's way? The Christian community today is in grave danger of losing its missionary zeal through a misguided desire not to

appear too exclusive. Since the only sin left in a permissive society that has lost the capacity to say no is intolerance, Christians are regularly called sinners, and we don't like it.

But misguided tolerance is deadly. How exclusive is electricity? Completely! You either relate to it on its terms or you die. Is electricity therefore a curse? Of course not! It is an incredible blessing, but only if you relate to it on its terms. The same is true for God. We relate to him on his terms, and he in his grace has allowed us to know what those terms are. This is what the whole sacrificial system was designed to teach. God wants to live in our midst, but given our sinful nature and his holy nature, that is not possible unless God makes a way and reveals that way to us, and we choose to walk in that way.

If you saw a little boy running to pick up a bare electric wire and the only way to stop him from touching it was to tackle him and knock him down, would you do it? Of course! But how intolerant and how cruel! The child does not mean any harm, and after all, your way of relating to electricity is just your own narrow idea. I think the analogy is clear. Everything depends on the truth of the Bible. If God is not transcendent and holy, if he is just the world, then there is no salvation from ourselves; we came from nothing and we go back to it. There is no right and wrong, and all so-called moralities are simply power plays. But if God *is* transcendent and holy, if he does want to relate to us in order to give us eternal life, and if we can only relate to him on his terms, then Christians must get out into the world with renewed zeal and joy.

This latter truth helps us to understand why God required Isaiah to do such a degrading thing as walking among his people either nude or seminude for three years. We are offended at a God who would demand such a thing of his faithful servant. The same thing applies when we think of Ezekiel, who was also called to act out various kinds of degrading things, such as cooking food over a fire of manure. Why would God call for this? Surely it wasn't necessary to go to such extremes!

It all depends on how seriously you take God and his Word. How important was it that the Judeans, and particularly Hezekiah, learn not to trust Egypt and instead trust God? Was it more important than Isaiah's dignity? Or was it just a matter of personal preference whether to obey God? Was it a matter of life and death for Judah? It certainly was. And it

may be argued that because of Isaiah's willingness to be faithful to God, Hezekiah did trust God and Judah gained another 115 years of life.

How seriously do I take the condition of the people around me? Seriously enough to be thought a fool or a little "cracked" if that will reach them? Of course, bizarre behavior for its own sake is not a virtue. It will do damage to the gospel. But every one of us who is a believer has to be ready to make the claims of the gospel visible in the most powerful way possible.

Isaiah 21:1–17

AN ORACLE CONCERNING the Desert by the Sea:

Like whirlwinds sweeping through the southland, an invader comes from the desert, from a land of terror.

²A dire vision has been shown to me: The traitor betrays, the looter takes loot.

Elam, attack! Media, lay siege!
I will bring to an end all the groaning she caused.

³At this my body is racked with pain, pangs seize me, like those of a woman in labor;
I am staggered by what I hear, I am bewildered by what I see.
⁴My heart falters, fear makes me tremble;
the twilight I longed for has become a horror to me.

⁵They set the tables, they spread the rugs, they eat, they drink! Get up, you officers, oil the shields!

⁶This is what the Lord says to me:

"Go, post a lookout and have him report what he sees. When he sees chariots with teams of horses, riders on donkeys or riders on camels, let him be alert, fully alert."

⁸And the lookout shouted,

"Day after day, my lord, I stand on the watchtower; every night I stay at my post.

9Look, here comes a man in a chariot with a team of horses.

And he gives back the answer:

'Babylon has fallen, has fallen!

All the images of its gods lie shattered on the ground!""

10O my people, crushed on the threshing floor,
 I tell you what I have heard from the LORD Almighty,
 from the God of Israel.

¹¹An oracle concerning Dumah:

Someone calls to me from Seir,
"Watchman, what is left of the night?"
Watchman, what is left of the night?"

12The watchman replies,
"Morning is coming, but also the night.

If you would ask, then ask; and come back yet again."

¹³An oracle concerning Arabia:

You caravans of Dedanites,
who camp in the thickets of Arabia,

14bring water for the thirsty;
you who live in Tema,
bring food for the fugitives.

15They flee from the sword,
from the drawn sword,
from the bent bow
and from the heat of battle.

¹⁶This is what the Lord says to me: "Within one year, as a servant bound by contract would count it, all the pomp of Kedar will come to an end. ¹⁷The survivors of the bowmen, the warriors of Kedar, will be few." The LORD, the God of Israel, has spoken.

Original Meaning

As MENTIONED AT the beginning of this section on the oracles against the nations (Isa. 13–23), it is difficult to know whether there is an intentional order. It does seem possible to see certain groupings. We began with the Mesopotamian powers of Babylon and Assyria (chs. 13–14) and then moved to the neighbors Philistia, Moab, Aram, and Israel (chs. 14–17). Chapter 18 formed an interlude chapter, where Ethiopia was used to focus on the lordship of Yahweh over all nations. Then came the oracle against Egypt (chs. 19–20).

But what about the remaining chapters? Some scholars believe that the four oracles in chapters 21 and 22 should be considered together, but the reasons given vary. Most comment on the prophet's clear sense of grief over what he sees happening. Many also observe the enigmatic titles of the first, second, and fourth oracles. I have proposed that the first refers to Babylon, while the second, third, and fourth all refer to Arabia, who will be failed by it.²

The Desert by the Sea (21:1–10)

THE TITLE OF this oracle is a puzzle. Literally it is "the burden of the desert of the sea." Clearly, that is a contradiction in terms: The desert is not wet, and the sea is not dry. So what is the writer intending to convey? Verse 9 suggests that the subject is Babylon, so why use this obscure title? Furthermore, if the subject is Babylon, what destruction is being talked about? The mention of Elam and Media (21:2) suggests the final destruction in 540 B.C., because prior to that time the Medes were allies of Babylon, not enemies. Yet the general time frame of this section (chs. 13–23) seems to be relating to events closer to Isaiah's own time. So perhaps the prophet is telescoping together several destructions, beginning with those near his own time and culminating in the Persian conquest—all to argue the folly of trusting Babylon.

But that still leaves unanswered the question of the title. The most likely possibility is that it is a play on the name of Merodach-Baladan's (39:1) homeland in extreme southern Mesopotamia, "the Sealand." Is the great Babylonian rebel in a position to offer Judah any help? Yes, just about as much as a desert might offer!

Verses 1–2 depict the suddenness of destruction. Like a whirlwind in the "southland" of Judah, the destruction will sweep in. Babylon's power, like Assyria's before it, will be built on betrayal and plunder. But the day will come when the tables will be turned. Both "Elam" and "Media" were occasionally allies of Babylon, and both turn against her at various points. This is always the story when power and self-interest are the guiding principles of life, and Isaiah sees nothing but tragedy in store for those who build on them.

Probably the best explanation for the grief that racks Isaiah in 21:3–4 is that he is lamenting for those who put their trust in Babylon and will be destroyed when that trust fails (see 22:4). But he may also be experiencing vicariously the grief of those who are tortured and taken into exile. They hope for the end of the day of battle and struggle, but at the end of the day, as "twilight" falls, it is not a twilight of respite from battle but a twilight of defeat, leading into a night of "horror" (21:4). The Babylon whom they trust now to deliver them from Assyria will eventually become the oppressor who destroys them before it itself is conquered.

Verse 5 reminds the reader of the scene in Daniel 5, where Belshazzar is feasting in Babylon while the enemy is at the gates. The scene of feasting is

quickly changed to one of frantic preparation for war ("oil the shields"), but the preparation is far too late.

While the overall sense of Isa. 21:6–9 is clear enough—that is, look for the message to come that "Babylon has fallen"—the specific significance of the repeated references to chariots and teams of horses is not. Perhaps they are suggestive of the fleeing, defeated remnants of an army who bring with them the first intimations of the defeat. Like Ezekiel later (Ezek. 3:17; 33:1–7), Isaiah is to be a watchman for his people to warn them of what lies ahead if they persist in disobeying God. The idols of Babylon cannot deliver their own land, so how can they deliver those outside of Babylon who trust in them?

Verse 10 continues that thought. The people of Judah are like grain "crushed on the threshing floor." The oxen have been driven around and around on the heap of grain, pulling a heavy sled behind them. The stalks and husks have been crushed and the kernels of grain separated. Soon the whole mass will be tossed in the air with winnowing forks so that the chaff can be blown away. Clearly, that is what the Judean people feel like. They have been crushed under the sled of Assyria, so it looks as if Babylon offers a ray of hope. But Isaiah, the watchman, sees a false hope. Babylon is no more able to help than any other nation on earth.

The "Dumah" Oracle (21:11–12)

THIS TWO-VERSE ORACLE is a puzzle. The message seems to concern Edom ("Seir," 21:11), but it is addressed to the Arabian oasis Dumah, which was about three hundred miles southeast of Jerusalem.⁴ This oasis was at the intersection of the east-west trade route from Babylon to Edom and Egypt, and the north-south route from the Red Sea to Palmyra. Undoubtedly, the fate of Babylon is of great concern to Dumah, and farther west to Edom. In view of the fact that the third oracle in this cycle clearly concerns the Arabians and the other great oasis of Tema, it seems best to retain the reference to Dumah.

But what of the message itself? Perhaps the thought is that even the Edomites turn to Isaiah, the Judean "watchman," to see what is happening in the east. Because of his God he is able to see the future in ways the ordinary "seer" cannot. But if that is the case, the message given is a rather enigmatic one. In 21:4, the speaker admitted that the longed-for twilight had

not produced relief. Now the prophet seems to be saying that the longed-for dawn may not be a relief either, for night will swiftly follow it. This may refer to the Assyrian "night" ending, but a Babylonian "night" following it in swift succession. It may also speak of the coming defeat of Sennacherib in 701 B.C. ("dawn"), but the subsequent destruction of Babylon in whom Judah is trusting in 689 B.C. ("night").

An Oracle on Arabia (21:13–17)

OF THE SUCCESSION of four oracles in Isaiah 21–22, this third one is the only one that appears to have a straightforward title. It is addressed to the "Arabians" who lived in the desert between Babylon and Judah. The oasis of "Tema" was located about two hundred miles south of Dumah on the road to the Red Sea, and Dedan is about ninety miles south of Tema. Both are located in an area of northwest Arabia known as Kedar (21:16). Tema is significant because this is where the last king of Babylon made his headquarters for most of his reign. While he was there, his son Belshazzar was viceregent in Babylon.

It is not clear who the "fugitives" mentioned in 21:14 are. Perhaps they are Babylonians fleeing the destruction of their city. Or they may be fugitives from Dumah, fleeing southward away from the conflagration spreading outward from southern Mesopotamia. But 21:16–17 make it clear that Kedar itself will not escape the disaster. War will overtake them "within one year" of this pronouncement having been made, and their armies will be decimated. All this is certain because Israel's God "has spoken."

Bridging Contexts

One of the classic examples of the failure of a web of deceptive alliances in our time is the story of Russia and Germany. One of Hitler's greatest fears growing out of World War I was of a "two-front" war. So, in order to secure his eastern flank while campaigning in the west, he concluded what must surely be one of the most cynical alliances of all time. Knowing that he would one day attack Russia (already having said so in his *Mein Kampf*), he still got Russia to agree to a nonaggression pact. For his part, Stalin was

frightened of the rapidly growing German war machine and congratulated himself for having effectively stopped it at his borders.

Both of these pirates had built their empires on lies and looting, and now they were announcing their "mutual understanding and trust." It is amazing that Stalin could not see what sort of person Hitler was after all the promises he had broken from Czechoslovakia onward, but perhaps the Russian tyrant thought he saw a kindred spirit in the man. It may also be true that Stalin was afraid of his remaining generals (after the purges of 1937–1938) amassing power within the country if he permitted a great buildup in the armed forces, and he thought he could avoid such a buildup with the pact.

In any case, once Hitler felt the west was secure, he turned to gobble up the great wheat fields of Byelo-Russia and the Ukraine, sure that a cowed Stalin would hide behind the Urals and sue for peace. But if Stalin misread Hitler, so did Hitler misread Stalin. Hitler did not know that he had kicked a bulldog. The former Orthodox priest had pursued his goals of absolute power for twenty years with incredible tenacity and stubbornness, and those traits would serve him well in "The Great Patriotic War." Both men thought that they had put something over on their neighbor that would be to their own advantage. But in the end, both countries were devastated.

That is the picture here. Whoever trusts in deception and betrayal to build his kingdom must eventually watch that kingdom being torn down by the very traits that built it in the first place. Trusting Babylon was an exercise in self-deception.

Contemporary Significance

PROMISES AND SELF-INTEREST. These three oracles speak of the sovereignty of God, the folly of trusting in human power, and the fickleness of human promises. The believer today must constantly remind himself or herself of these truths. We must think about these things from our own point of view. Are people depending on us? Why? Have we, like Babylon, made promises to people that are chiefly for the purpose of getting them involved in "our agenda"? Are we only interested in using them for our own advantage? Have we made promises to them that we either cannot or do not intend to keep?

These are serious questions. One of the reasons they are so serious is because of the immense capacity for self-deception that human self-interest provokes. Needing to take care of ourselves, we easily justify questionable behaviors because of that "worthwhile" end. Parents can make promises to children, spouses can make commitments to spouses, church members can make promises to other church members—and all the time those promises are only devices to promote our own self-interest. I do not care about my child's development; I only want peace from his constant nagging, or I want her to think well of me. I promise to love, honor, and cherish until death, when what I really want is a beautiful wedding, or the sense of having exclusive right to the other person, or the satisfaction of having beat out the competition. I promise to be faithful as a church member, but only so long as it does not interfere with other, more enjoyable activities. As a result, when keeping the promises requires me to deny myself in some way, as it always will, the promises, like Babylon's, turn out to be useless. Since the very reason I made the promise was for self-interest, as soon as keeping the promise conflicts with self-interest, there is no contest.

At the same time, we need to be realistic about the promises of others to us. In many cases their commitments to us will be just as self-serving as ours were to them. If we look for any ultimate security in human commitments or human institutions, we need to be prepared for disappointment. This is not only true because of the self-interest problem but also because of human limitations. If there are mighty human weapons to be used on our behalf, there are even mightier ones to be used against us. Humanity simply cannot provide the kind of ultimate security we are looking for. The result is not only disappointment but often cynicism and embitterment.

What is the solution for both of these cases? How can we become truly trustworthy in our relations with others, and how can we avoid the embitterment of failed trust? We need to surrender our self-interest into the hands of the sovereign God. We need to stop trusting others to supply what only God can provide, and we need to stop trying to supply our own needs out of our own resources and turn instead to God in a genuine self-denying trust. If I have come to know that God is infinitely trustworthy and if I have abandoned my self-interest into his hands, I can become trustworthy myself. My promises are not to get but genuinely to give. And if others take advantage of my promises, as they frequently will, given the human

condition, I can remain faithful knowing that I have resources to turn to that are not dependent on what others may do.

Here is the secret of "sweet" saints over the centuries of the Christian church. Have they never been disappointed by broken promises or failed trusts? Of course they have, and maybe more than the rest of us because they are so prodigal with their kindnesses. But they have put their weight down on God and not on humans. Thus, if the human branch beneath them breaks, they can still sing, knowing they have wings to fly.

All this depends on the sovereignty of God displayed in the final phrase of Isa. 21:17. If there is a sovereign God who can reveal himself and his will to human beings, then there is a divine resource we can turn to in the midst of trouble and uncertainty. Furthermore, if that God is loving, faithful, and good, we who abandon ourselves into his care need not fear any final loss, on either side of the grave. But everything depends on the validity of this revelation. If God is one degree less than what the Bible claims him to be, either in his power or his character, then we are without hope. But the testimony of the Bible and of the saints coincides. The One Holy Being in the universe is all-powerful and all-loving. We can trust him (see Matt. 6:26–30; Rom. 5:8).

This is the message Isaiah is trying to get his compatriots to hear: God is faithful and humans are not. Humans will fail you, so if you abandon your trust in God to trust in the nations of the earth, prepare for disappointment (Isa. 21:3–4; see also Ps. 56:1–4). But if you have put your trust in God, you can be faithful even to those who fail you because, like Christ, you will have "food" to eat that no one else knows of (John 4:32–34).

Isaiah 22:1–25

AN ORACLE CONCERNING the Valley of Vision:

What troubles you now,
that you have all gone up on the roofs,
O town full of commotion,
O city of tumult and revelry?
Your slain were not killed by the sword,
nor did they die in battle.

³All your leaders have fled together; they have been captured without using the bow.

All you who were caught were taken prisoner together, having fled while the enemy was still far away.

⁴Therefore I said, "Turn away from me; let me weep bitterly.

Do not try to console me over the destruction of my people."

⁵The Lord, the LORD Almighty, has a day of tumult and trampling and terror in the Valley of Vision, a day of battering down walls and of crying out to the mountains.

⁶Elam takes up the quiver, with her charioteers and horses; Kir uncovers the shield.

⁷Your choicest valleys are full of chariots, and horsemen are posted at the city gates;

⁸the defenses of Judah are stripped away.

And you looked in that day to the weapons in the Palace of the Forest;

⁹you saw that the City of David had many breaches in its defenses; you stored up water in the Lower Pool.

¹⁰You counted the buildings in Jerusalem and tore down houses to strengthen the wall.

11 You built a reservoir between the two walls for the water of the Old Pool,but you did not look to the One who made it.

or have regard for the One who planned it long ago.

12The Lord, the LORD Almighty, called you on that day to weep and to wail, to tear out your hair and put on sackcloth.

¹³But see, there is joy and revelry, slaughtering of cattle and killing of sheep,

eating of meat and drinking of wine! "Let us eat and drink," you say, "for tomorrow we die!"

¹⁴The LORD Almighty has revealed this in my hearing: "Till your dying day this sin will not be atoned for," says the Lord, the LORD Almighty.

¹⁵This is what the Lord, the LORD Almighty, says:

"Go, say to this steward, to Shebna, who is in charge of the palace:

What are you doing here and who gave you permission to cut out a grave for yourself here, hewing your grave on the height and chiseling your resting place in the rock?

17"Beware, the LORD is about to take firm hold of you and hurl you away, O you mighty man.

18He will roll you up tightly like a ball and throw you into a large country.

There you will die and there your splendid chariots will remain—
you disgrace to your master's house!

19I will depose you from your office, and you will be ousted from your

position.

²⁰"In that day I will summon my servant, Eliakim son of Hilkiah. ²¹I will clothe him with your robe and fasten your sash around him and hand your authority over to him. He will be a father to those who live in Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. ²²I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. ²³I will drive him like a peg into a firm place; he will be a seat of honor for the house of his father. ²⁴All the glory of his family will hang on him: its offspring and offshoots—all its lesser vessels, from the bowls to all the jars.

²⁵"In that day," declares the LORD Almighty, "the peg driven into the firm place will give way; it will be sheared off and will fall, and the load hanging on it will be cut down." The LORD has spoken.

Original Meaning

THIS APPEARS TO BE the fourth of the oracles in the sequence beginning with the oracle "concerning the Desert by the Sea" in 21:1. Like two of the other three, its title is enigmatic, and it is also marked by the prophet's grief over what he sees as about to take place (21:3–4; 22:4, 12). Given these two similarities and recognizing that the second and third oracles seem to be related to the fall of Babylon, most likely this one is related in the same way. Judah is rejoicing in the help that Babylon can give in the fight against Assyria, but Isaiah weeps as he sees that not only will Babylon give no help, but it will eventually be the cause of Judah's destruction.

The Valley of Vision (22:1–14)

THE STRANGE TITLE of the oracle ("The Valley of Vision") is reminiscent of the title for the oracle against Babylon in 21:1. Like that one, it seems to involve contradictory ideas to make its point. A valley is not where one goes to get a long view of things. In fact, it is the exact opposite; it is a place where you cannot see. It seems plain from the rest of the oracle that it is addressed to Jerusalem, but why describe it so strangely? Perhaps the prophet is condemning the Judeans precisely for their lack of vision. They claim to know God and his ways, but their behavior makes it appear they do not. Instead of standing on a mountaintop where they can see clearly, they are in the bottom of a valley, having lost all perspective on reality and what it means. In fact, they have become like one more of the pagan nations on whom judgment is being pronounced in this section of the book.

There is considerable uncertainty among scholars as to the events being referred to in these verses. The references to strengthening defenses (22:8–11) suggest either the coming of Sennacherib in 701 B.C. or the final siege of Jerusalem begun in 588 B.C. However, the references to rejoicing and revelry (22:2, 13) are difficult to integrate into either of those events. Also,

Eliakim, not Shebna, was prime minister ("in charge of the palace," 22:15) in 701 B.C. This suggests another possibility, the attack of Sargon on the Philistine city of Ashdod in 711 B.C. (cf. 20:1). This must have been a frightening event for the Judeans, certainly frightening enough to provoke a strengthening of the defenses. But after taking Azekah, another Philistine city, the Assyrians withdrew. That surely would have occasioned a time of rejoicing. It also would seem to confirm any encouragement to revolt that the Babylonian envoys may have given to Hezekiah in their visit at about this time (see comments on ch. 38 for the date of the events in chs. 38–39).

All the inhabitants of "the Valley of Vision" can see is short-term relief (22:1–2). They cannot see the longer view that the prophet has, namely, the events just before the fall of Jerusalem, when King Zedekiah fled from the city with his bodyguard only to be captured near Jericho. Thus, the people are rejoicing at the moment over a short-term lifting of the Assyrian threat, while the prophet sees how this whole episode will end 125 years later and weeps "bitterly" over that reality (22:4). He sees what they cannot.

Verses 5–7 probably continue Isaiah's view of the distant future, when the besieging armies will be camped around the city, filling the Kidron Valley on the east and the Hinnom Valley on the south. Among the Babylonian armies will be mercenary soldiers from "Elam" and "Kir" (possibly Media). In that hour there will be no more rejoicing in "the Valley of Vision" but only "tumult" and "terror."

In 22:8–14 the prophet makes his pronouncement against "the Valley of Vision." Note the recurrence of verbs for seeing in verses 8, 9, and 11. Temporal "realities" have been looked at instead of eternal ones. It is not clear who the repeated "you" is in verses 8–12. It is probably Hezekiah, because we know he strengthened the walls of Jerusalem and had the famous tunnel dug to bring water from the spring of Gihon to the pool at the foot of the old city (2 Chron. 32:1–5); if so, he is not named. Moreover, we should note that although the first verb of the succession of second-person verbs is singular (Isa. 22:8),² the rest are plural (22:9–11). Perhaps the point is that Hezekiah is not himself responsible for the misplaced priorities, but that it is the people at large and the royal counselors, like Shebna (22:15–19), who paid no attention to the real causes of the coming disaster. Both the books of Kings and Chronicles suggest that Hezekiah himself had his priorities in the right order (2 Kings 18:1–8; 2 Chron. 29:1–31:21).

Jerusalem exists as the capital city of Judah only because of the grace and power of God (Isa. 22:11). He was not only the One who gave the city to David against all the odds (2 Sam. 5:6–10), he was also the One who gave the entire land to his people (Josh. 1:2; etc.). So since Israel had not taken either the city or the land in their own strength, it is foolish to think they can keep them in their own strength. The land is a covenant gift from their covenant Lord. Thus, the most important thing to do in a moment of danger and threat is to be sure that they are acting within the covenant Lord's will and that their relationship with him is intact so that they can continue to receive the promised blessings of the covenant.

But that is precisely what they are not doing. They are acting as if the most important things they can do are the human things they do for themselves, such as tearing down the houses that are crowded against the insides of the walls, so that the building materials can be used to "strengthen the wall" (Isa. 22:10) and also so that troops can easily be rushed to any point where an attack is being made.

In fact, Judah's relations with God are in anything but good repair. They congratulate themselves that they are not corrupt as the northern kingdom of Israel had been, and so they believe they have survived because of their merits when Israel fell. But Isaiah and the other prophets see clearly that all the same trends are at work in Judah that so tragically affected Israel. Furthermore, if those trends are not reversed, Judah will become as corrupt as Israel and will go the same way in the end. When that end did come in the 580s B.C., Ezekiel said that Judah and Israel were like two whoring sisters and that in the end Judah was even more deserving of punishment than Israel (Ezek. 23).

It is for this reason that God is calling for weeping and wailing (Isa. 22:12). This is no time for self-congratulation and partying. It is a time for bitter repentance and for pleading with God for mercy. It is a time for careful self-reflection and for amending their ways where those ways have varied from God's ways. There is still hope for Judah, if they will only learn the lessons of the times.

But all the indications are that they have neither the interest nor the attention to learn those lessons. Thus, since the people will not weep and wail over their sins, it falls to the prophet to do it (22:4). He sees that apart from confession, repentance, and the attendant mercy of God, there is no

possibility for the sins of the nation to be "atoned for" ("covered over," 22:14), and that is a source of terrible grief for him. Where there is confession and repentance, that mercy is always available, as the book of Jonah makes abundantly clear; but apart from that kind of humble turning to God, even he is powerless to bring his mercy to bear on the situation.

A Picture of Two Men (22:15–25)

As WE HAVE already seen earlier in Isaiah, one of its features is the use of graphic illustration. We first saw it in chapter 3 and most recently in chapter 20. After a discourse, the prophet's point is reinforced with a concrete picture of what has just been said. Here the picture takes two parts, revolving around two different men. The first illustration (22:15–19) is negative, while the second (22:20–25) is more positive.

As is clear from chapter 36, where the embassy to the Rabshakeh of Assyria is headed by the "palace administrator" (the same Heb. phrase translated "in charge of the palace" here), this position has sweeping responsibilities. In fact, there is reason to think that it is analogous to the task of "prime minister." Thus, Shebna carries great responsibility for the well-being of the country, both spiritually and materially. But his priorities are misplaced. Instead of denying himself for the good of the country, he is building himself a fine rock tomb. Instead of losing himself in order to bring life to his country, he is trying to make sure he will be remembered in death! When he should be thinking about the life of others, he is focusing all his attention on his own death.

There are many fine rock-cut tombs in the hillside on the east side of the Kidron Valley directly across from the lower part of old Jerusalem, which was the main part of the city at that time. It is easy to think of the prime minister driving one of his "splendid chariots," one of the "perks" of his office, out to see how the work was coming. The fine tomb would be there for all future generations to see how important and significant Shebna had been. But when he arrives at the site, he finds an unwelcome visitor, the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah tells Shebna that far from being important and significant, he is a "disgrace to [his] master's house" (22:18). Instead of being memorialized before all the people, he will be wadded up and thrown away like an old rag (22:17–18). We do not know Shebna's ultimate fate,

but the reference to "a large country" (22:18) leads us to wonder whether he may have died as a hostage in Assyria.

In the short term, Shebna will have his office taken from him and given to another (see 22:19–25). We can imagine that for a person like Shebna, the tokens of importance were significant to him. Thus, to have his official uniform ("robe" and "sash," 22:21) taken from him and given to another will be terribly humiliating. We cannot help but think of 2:6–4:1 here, which speaks of the inevitable humiliation that comes to those who exalt themselves.

It is not known whether the "key" referred to in 22:22 is only a figure of speech. Perhaps it is a symbolic badge of office, or it may actually have been a key to the palace. In any case, it represents absolute authority to determine who will have an audience with the king and who will not. Unlike Shebna, who is only concerned for himself, Eliakim will be concerned for the people under his charge and will act as a "father" (22:21) to them. That is, he will be concerned about their welfare before his own and will work for them, not himself. The reference to "the house of David" may also be significant. It suggests that Eliakim's interests are not merely for temporal affairs, as symbolized by the "house" (i.e., the palace). Rather, they are for the larger spiritual matters that ought to be concerning the court, the "house" of David.

But there is a danger that can befall anyone who is truly responsible and reliable. That danger is spelled out in 22:23–25. Such a person becomes so dependable that people rely too much on him. Like a good, strong "peg" in the wall, everything imaginable, and some things unimaginable, get hung on such a person. A weak or broken peg we do not put so much upon. But the one that is obviously strong and reliable we hang everything on. In this case, there seems to be a suggestion that Eliakim's family will become a special burden to him (22:23–24). This is still a feature of Near Eastern culture. If one member "makes good," he is expected to care for and make a place for all the rest, even the ne'er-do-wells and the hangers-on.

Sadly, however, even the best of us often cannot endure such pressure forever. That seems to be what Isaiah is predicting for Eliakim. Eventually, he will crack under the strain, and all that has been dependent on him will come crashing down (22:25). That such a thing will happen in that setting is entirely predictable. The people have rejected divine resources and are

trusting in humans instead. Most humans fail their trust, and thus if one turns out to be unusually trustworthy, the loads are simply piled on. But no human can bear what is meant to be rolled onto the Lord (Ps. 37:3–6). Even the best person will break under those circumstances.

Bridging Contexts

It is said that the last nights of Berlin in April of 1945 were marked by revelries and parties. The Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra played Wagner's *The Twilight of the Gods*. There was a general air of "Let's eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." The inflated promises of National Socialism to bring in the millennium—the thousand-year *Reich*—had disappeared in dust and ashes. The Russian army was on the Oder River, just a few miles to the east, and to the west, German soldiers were surrendering in the thousands to the victorious Allies. The war was lost. But instead of national repentance or even reflection, there was only an attempt to forget in waves of artificially induced giddiness.

From one point of view, such a response is not surprising. What was there to repent of? The Kaiser's army in World War I had at least made a pretense of trusting in God, as their uniform belt buckles had stamped on them "Gott Mit Uns" (i.e., "God With Us"). Hitler's armies made no such pretense. They had abandoned the Christian God Nietzsche accused of turning men into old women and had tried to revive the harsh gods of Norse and Germanic legend. But their real god was simply the god of power. Now cruel fate had turned against them, and the fickle god of power had gone off to fawn on their enemies. What's to repent of?

For starters, there were an estimated fifty million people dead, including six million Jews. The culture and spirit of Europe lay in ruins, with the spirit in particular hard-pressed ever to recover. Germany, the land of Luther, had, like Judah many years before it, become a "Valley of Vision," where a glorious past of spiritual insight had been forfeited and the claims to see true reality were in fact a mockery.

Contemporary Significance

PLANS AND PRIORITIES. This passage of Isaiah is about priorities. There is nothing wrong with making preparations for certain eventualities, nor is there anything wrong with using our strengths and abilities to care for ourselves. The book of Proverbs is clear that those who are lazy and careless are fools. They have not made adequate preparations for the day of trouble, and when it falls on them, they are helpless. By contrast, those who are wise have carefully planned their lives and will carry out those plans. Note Proverbs 24:30–34; 27:23–27:

I went past the field of the sluggard,
past the vineyard of the man who lacks judgment;
thorns had come up everywhere,
the ground was covered with weeds,
and the stone wall was in ruins.
I applied my heart to what I observed
and learned a lesson from what I saw:
A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest—
and poverty will come on you like a bandit
and scarcity like an armed man.

Be sure you know the condition of your flocks, give careful attention to your herds; for riches do not endure forever, and a crown is not secure for all generations. When the hay is removed and new growth appears and the grass from the hills is gathered in, the lambs will provide you with clothing, and the goats with the price of a field. You will have plenty of goats' milk to feed you and your family and to nourish your servant girls.⁴

So what is the problem here in Isaiah? Plans and preparations have been made without first seeking God's guidance and blessing. Proverbs is also insistent that the outcome of all our plans is in the hands of God. "A man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps" (Prov. 16:9); "the

horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the LORD" (21:31). How seriously do we seek God's plans before we make our plans? How easily do we work everything out our way and then casually ask God to bless it?

But even more seriously, do we pay more attention to our relationship to the Lord than we do to our plans and preparations? This was the problem in Isaiah's day, and it remains so in ours. The plans may have been fine, but how can God bless them when the people making them are self-serving covenant-breakers? That is the problem with the rich farmer in Jesus' parable in Luke 12:16–21. He does not pay attention to the main issue in life:

"And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry."

"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'

"This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God." (Luke 12:19–21)

In Isaiah's day, it was a leadership problem. The Judean leaders were worrying about walls and water supplies when they should have been worrying about sin. How much easier it is to plan for increased facilities in a church than it is to deal with the spiritual deadness in the congregation. How much easier it is to plan additional programs for speaking to postmoderns than it is to speak out against rampant materialism. Thus, the physical plant may be increasing and the numbers in the congregation may be growing while the members of the church are drifting further and further from God. Like the Judeans or the rich farmer, we are "fat and happy," rejoicing in our blessings, going from one party to another, chiding the saints among us for their long faces and sour attitudes, never hearing the Lord saying to us, "You fools!"

What does it mean to be an Eliakim rather than a Shebna? Above everything else, it means that we have gotten ourselves off our hands. That's the difference between a David and a Saul, or a Jesus and a Judas. The second person in each of these pairs was always looking out for himself. He was worried about his image, about what other people thought of him, about how he was going to supply his needs, and about how people would remember him. These were the last things the first person in each pair worried about.

I am convinced that these are the kinds of things Jesus had in mind when he said we must become like little children to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:3–4). There are a number of things about children that are not heavenly: They are ignorant and nave; they can be petty and selfish; and if you are a parent, you know they are not innocent. But, by and large, they lack self-consciousness. It does not occur to them to worry about how they are appearing to others. Status means nothing to them. But how quickly that changes as we grow up. We become absorbed not with reality but with image. We are consumed with a need for approval and position, and all too often with the approval of the wrong people and the positions that are worthless.

That was Shebna. He had achieved the highest position in the land after the king, and he was using that position to build a memorial for himself. He was laboring for what did not really matter, and as a result his only real memorial is the one of disgrace found in Isaiah 22. We can go down that road too unless we make that kind of total self-renunciation where in the end we care for nothing but the approval of God. In his sermon "The Weight of Glory," C. S. Lewis says that it matters little what we think of God, but it matters to all eternity what God thinks of us.⁶

That is the kind of person we see in Eliakim. Like Christ, he will care more for the welfare of others than he does for his own. And like Christ, his greatest joy will be to make it possible for people to enter the throne room of the King. He will be seeking God's grace so that he can be responsible, reliable, and true in the cesspool of court intrigue. He will be concerned for the needs of others above his own to the extent that he will shoulder loads that are really too heavy to carry. But he will carry them, not because he constantly needs to prove to himself that he is indispensable or that he is

really somebody, but because he does not want others to have to bear those loads.

Nor do such burdens need to break us in the end, as they apparently did Eliakim. To be sure, health may break, not because we have abused our bodies but simply because the reed we were given at birth was weaker than the one given to some others. But even in a broken body, our spiritual health may be radiant and robust, in spite of our carrying impossible loads. If we have learned how to carry those loads to the Master and leave them there, we will not be broken by what we are called to shoulder for the sake of others.

This is the opportunity Christ offers each of us. We may chose to be Eliakim or Shebna. We may focus on the temporal or the eternal. If we focus on the temporal, we and all our works will perish with the temporal. If we choose the eternal, then none of our temporal works will ever be lost (Rom. 8:13). Furthermore, like Eliakim and the apostles after him, we will be given the authority to open the doors of heaven for those who will never get in otherwise (Matt. 16:19; cf. also Rev. 3:7). More frighteningly, we will have the authority to close the doors for those who are trying to get in for all the wrong reasons. There is power, but it is only gotten by renouncing power and all its trappings.

Isaiah 23:1–18

AN ORACLE CONCERNING Tyre:

Wail, O ships of Tarshish!
For Tyre is destroyed
and left without house or harbor.
From the land of Cyprus
word has come to them.

²Be silent, you people of the island and you merchants of Sidon, whom the seafarers have enriched.
³On the great waters came the grain of the Shihor; the harvest of the Nile was the revenue of Tyre, and she became the marketplace of the nations.

⁴Be ashamed, O Sidon, and you, O fortress of the sea, for the sea has spoken:
"I have neither been in labor nor given birth;
I have neither reared sons nor brought up daughters."
⁵When word comes to Egypt,

When word comes to Egypt, they will be in anguish at the report from Tyre.

⁶Cross over to Tarshish; wail, you people of the island. ⁷Is this your city of revelry, the old, old city, whose feet have taken her to settle in far-off lands?

8Who planned this against Tyre, the bestower of crowns, whose merchants are princes, whose traders are renowned in the earth?

⁹The LORD Almighty planned it, to bring low the pride of all glory and to humble all who are renowned on the earth.

10 Till your land as along the Nile,
O Daughter of Tarshish,
for you no longer have a harbor.
11 The LORD has stretched out his hand
over the sea
and made its kingdoms tremble.
He has given an order concerning
Phoenicia
that her fortresses be destroyed.
12 He said, "No more of your reveling,
O Virgin Daughter of Sidon, now
crushed!

"Up, cross over to Cyprus; even there you will find no rest."

13 Look at the land of the Babylonians, this people that is now of no account! The Assyrians have made it a place for desert creatures; they raised up their siege towers, they stripped its fortresses bare and turned it into a ruin.

¹⁴Wail, you ships of Tarshish; your fortress is destroyed!

¹⁵At that time Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years, the span of a king's life. But at the end of these seventy years, it will happen to Tyre as in the song of the prostitute:

16"Take up a harp, walk through the city, O prostitute forgotten; play the harp well, sing many a song, so that you will be remembered."

¹⁷At the end of seventy years, the LORD will deal with Tyre. She will return to her hire as a prostitute and will ply her trade with all the kingdoms on the face of the earth. ¹⁸Yet her profit and her earnings will be set apart for the LORD; they will not be stored up or hoarded. Her profits will go to those who live before the LORD, for abundant food and fine clothes.

Original Meaning

WE COME NOW to the last of Isaiah's oracles against the nations (chs. 13–23). As we said at the outset, these oracles serve two purposes in the present structure of the book. (1) Isaiah promised in chapter 11 that although Judah's persistent trust of the nations instead of God will result in destruction of the nation and captivity among the nations, God will one day restore the people from that captivity. The question such a promise raises is whether God is really capable of doing that. The oracles against the nations demonstrate that the God of Israel knows the future of each of the nations and that they are ultimately accountable to him. They are in his hand, not he in theirs, as is true of the idols. Therefore, he can deliver his people whenever he chooses.

(2) These chapters also introduce a subdivision of the book I have labeled "Lessons in Trust" (chs. 13–35). In these chapters Isaiah is seeking to show Hezekiah and his generation the foolishness of trusting the nations and the great wisdom of trusting the Lord. The first part of that subdivision, the oracles against the nations, raises the question: "Why would you trust any

of the nations instead of the Lord when all the nations are subject to him and some of them will actually turn to him in faith before history closes?"

The last oracle is addressed to Tyre, the great Phoenician (Canaanite) seaport located on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea, about one hundred miles northwest of Jerusalem. As Babylon, with which the series began, was the great commercial power on the east of the ancient Near Eastern world, Tyre was the commercial power on the west. The Phoenicians, living roughly where the modern nation of Lebanon is located today, were pretty much forced to become a seafaring nation by their geography. The Lebanon mountain range runs parallel to the coast at this point, with fingers of the range extending right to the water's edge. This means that both east-west and north-south travel by land is difficult.

But this geography also means that in the bays created by the fingers of the mountain range were some excellent ports. When we remember that in ancient times the Lebanon mountains were covered with forests, it becomes easy to see how the Phoenicians got into the business of freighting lumber first to lumber-starved Egypt and then to other parts of the ancient world. From there, Phoenician mastery of the Mediterranean Sea seemed limitless. We remember that Carthage, which battled Rome for supremacy in the third and second centuries B.C., was a Phoenician colony. Sidon, located about twenty-five miles north of Tyre, was another important Phoenician port. These two cities vied with each other for control of the trade. The present oracle seems to include Sidon in the judgment along with Tyre (23:2, 4, 12). Tyre, being closer to Israel, was more important to Israel for trade.

Tyre's Destruction (23:1–14)

ISAIAH BEGINS HIS discussion of Tyre's destruction with the word reaching the merchant ships homeward bound from the West. The exact location of "Tarshish" is unknown, though many scholars place it in Spain at Tartessus.² When Tyrian ships stop over at "Cyprus," they hear the news that they have no home port to return to. The reference to "the island" in 23:2 is a recognition that Tyre consisted of both a mainland city and an offshore island, with the harbor between the two. Verse 3 notes that Tyre was a shipper for Egyptian "grain." The "Nile" Valley ("Shihor" is probably one of the Delta branches) produced much grain that was of no use to the Egyptians unless they sold it. For shipping it elsewhere they were

dependent on the Phoenicians. One of the reasons the Romans were so anxious to gain control of Egypt many hundreds of years later was to get control of the grain source on which Rome itself had come to depend.

In 23:4 the Canaanite sea god Yam cries out like a parent bereft of children. Tyre, his foremost child, is gone, and it is as though he has never had any children. When the word reaches "Egypt" (23:5), the Egyptians "will be in anguish," not only because they have lost their trading partner but also because they know that with the loss of one more country lying between them and the conquerors from Mesopotamia, their own time of terror is drawing nearer.

Verses 6–12 are addressed to the Phoenician colony of Tarshish as the Lord calls on them to think about the implications of what has happened. Tyre was a "city of revelry" (23:7), a place of wealth and pleasure. It was also an "old" city, a mother city that had given birth to Tarshish and probably more colonies that we do not know of now (23:7). These colonies were so powerful and wealthy that each had its own king, authorized by the mother city. Tyre's merchants had become so wealthy that they were no longer considered businessmen but rather were a part of the nobility (23:8).

Yet Isaiah sees the day when all of that will come to a screeching halt. The revelry will cease (23:12), and Tarshish will have to become self-subsistent, since the Egyptian grain will no longer be available (23:10).³ What possibly explains this terrible coming disaster? The answer is to be found in the recurrence of two of Isaiah's favorite themes: the plan of Yahweh⁴ and the humbling of the proud.⁵ Tyre will not fall by accident or because of the superior might of the Assyrians, the Babylonians, or the Greeks. It will fall according to the eternal purposes of the Holy One of Israel.

As I have remarked elsewhere, this takes incredible faith on the part of the prophet. There seems little evidence to support such an outlandish claim. Yet God said it, and that was enough for Isaiah. Nor were the plan and purpose of God's merely arbitrary. He had not just taken a disliking to Tyre and decided to destroy it. Rather, like all the other pagan nations (including Judah, cf. ch. 22), Tyre exalted itself against the Creator (23:9). It promulgated a lie that humans can supply their own spiritual needs and can shape deity in the image of humanity. In the end pride is what destroys

the human race, and God's hand is extended against pride in all its forms (see also 5:25; 9:12, 17, 21; 10:4).

As Childs points out, the RSV (and NRSV) rendering of the second and third clauses of 23:13 is attractive: "This is the people; it was not Assyria." That is, the prophet (or in Childs's view, a later editor) points out that Tyre was not destroyed by the Assyrians of Isaiah's own time but by the later Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar. However, that rendering is not grammatically defensible, and the rendering of NIV and several other modern translations is correct. The reader is invited to compare the fate of Babylon with that which is coming to Tyre. Sargon brought heavy destruction on the city of Babylon in 710 B.C. and Sennacherib even greater in 689 B.C. Thus, the two cities that begin and end the sequence of oracles are brought together here. Neither will escape the judgment planned by God.

Tyre's Turning to the Lord (23:15–18)

LIKE EGYPT EARLIER (19:18–25), Isaiah foresees a day when Tyre will turn to the Lord. This message is set apart from the preceding verses not only by its content but also by it prose format. While the general point is clear enough—that Tyre's profits will be given over to the Lord—some of the precise points are unclear. For instance, it is not clear what the seventy-year period in 23:15 refers to.⁸ Perhaps it is simply an indefinite time of punishment, with seventy referring to completeness. In any case, after this time of eclipse the Lord will permit Tyre to regain some of its former eminence. Once again it will sell itself to the merchants of the world in order to gain a profit (23:17).

Commentators have struggled with the idea of a prostitute's profits being given over to the Lord, since this is specifically prohibited in Deuteronomy 23:18. Various solutions have been offered, none of which fully resolve the problem. It may be that the prophet is simply continuing to use prostitution as a symbol for trade, as elsewhere in the prophets. But there is nothing intrinsically sinful about trade, and its profits may be given over to the Lord without shame. In any case, the point is clear: Why fear or trust Tyre instead of the Lord, when the Lord holds Tyre's fate in his hands?

THIS CHAPTER SPEAKS of the dismay of colonies and clients as the mother city comes to destruction. We may think of the struggles of some of the members of the British Commonwealth as they have tried to find their own way after the collapse of the British Empire. Their relations and their trade had been largely coordinated by the mother country, and when that influence was dissipated at the end of World War II, a number of the former colonies found themselves struggling in a new world where the rules were all different.

On a more personal level, we can see the destructive nature of the relationship that psychologists have come to label *codependency*. It used to be thought, for instance, that all the fault was on the side of an alcoholic husband. We thought of the poor, long-suffering wife who had to put up with her husband's constantly "falling off the wagon." Then we were surprised to learn that after that man's death, she married another one just like him. What happened? In fact, she had become just as dependent on the husband's failings for her sense of identity as he had been on her for continually taking him back and drying him out again. And because from one point of view she needed his failings to support her own need for being abused and unappreciated, she was unwilling to force her husband to take some of the hard steps necessary to take responsibility for himself and overcome the addiction. To become ultimately dependent on anything other than God is finally destructive, even if it appears that we are not dependent.

Contemporary Significance

STEWARDSHIP OF WEALTH. Whereas Babylon's love was for glory and military power, Tyre's love was for money and the luxury and influence it could buy. As the playwright said, "Diamonds are a girl's best friend"—and Tyre would have echoed that sentiment. The strange thing about money is that there is never enough. No matter how much we get, we always want more.

Few would admit to loving money for itself. This brings up pictures of Silas Marner living in one or two filthy rooms continually counting and recounting his gold coins. That is definitely not a "cool" picture. But it is difficult to separate the money from what we think it can buy. How big a house is big enough? How many cars are enough? How many television

sets? How much clothing? And how much do we need for a "comfortable" retirement? The idea of moderation has gone out of fashion. What are we looking for? Comfort, pleasure, and security—the things humans have been looking for since the beginning of time. And what will give these to us? Money, lots and lots of money, the more the better!

In other words, we are little different from Tyre. We have allied ourselves, both personally and nationally, with the sources of wealth. We have forgotten or ignored Jesus' words in Mark 10:24–25 about how hard it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven:

The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

Why is it so hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God? Because they have found another source of trust besides God. Their allegiance has been given to another kingdom. And this can happen all too unconsciously. We start out as servants of God, but he blesses us with wealth, and all too easily we slip from one kingdom to another. No longer is our trust in the God who cares for us. Now our trust is in the money we have, which will secure us against all pain, discomfort, and insecurity. Then when God calls us to give it up, as he did the young man in the Gospel account, we cannot do it.

But the money is the Lord's, not ours. There is the fatal error. We keep thinking how generous we are by allowing the Lord to have 10 percent of our money. But John Wesley had it right in his sermon on money when he said that we have it backward. Wesley said that for the Christian, all our money is God's. The only issue is how much of God's money we are going to spend on ourselves. As the Tyrians were to find out, their money was not theirs; whoever was stronger than they were could take it all away, and nothing they could do would stop it. Tyre's wealth was a gift from the God of Israel, and in the end the best thing they could do was to give it back to the One who had given it to them in the first place.

Wesley has some timeless advice on the stewardship of wealth. Although he himself had a number of ascetic tendencies, he was no ascetic. He believed that a person should amass as much wealth as honesty, integrity, diligence, and brotherly love would permit. But this wealth was not to be squandered on oneself or one's family in what he called "dainties" or "delicacies." Rather, it should be used to advance the kingdom of God in us and in those around us. On these grounds he proposed that we should be guided by four principles:

- (1) In expending this, am I acting according to my character? [That is,] am I acting herein, not as a proprietor, but as a steward of my Lord's goods?
- (2) Am I doing this in obedience to his Word? In what scripture does he require me so to do?
- (3) Can I offer up this action, this expense, as a sacrifice to God through Jesus Christ?
- (4) Have I reason to believe that for this very work I shall have a reward at the resurrection of the just?¹⁰

Of course, these could be made a straitjacket that would deliver us into bondage. But few American Christians are too narrow in their conception of the relation of money to our faith. We are more likely to err on the other side. We gain all we can, but then we expend the mass of it on ourselves in ways that cannot help but anger a holy God whose heart bleeds for a lost and hurting world. If we are to learn the lesson of Tyre, we must learn to let go of our wealth and relearn the reality of trusting God. Like them, we need to learn that actually we are working for God and that all our money is "set apart [i.e., holy] for the LORD" (23:18).

Isaiah 24:1-23

SEE, THE LORD is going to lay waste the earth and devastate it; he will ruin its face and scatter its inhabitants—

2it will be the same for priest as for people, for master as for servant, for mistress as for maid, for seller as for buyer, for borrower as for lender, for debtor as for creditor.

3The earth will be completely laid waste and totally plundered.

The LORD has spoken this word.

⁴The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers, the exalted of the earth languish.

⁵The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant.

⁶Therefore a curse consumes the earth; its people must bear their guilt.

Therefore earth's inhabitants are burned up, and very few are left.

⁷The new wine dries up and the vine withers; all the merrymakers groan.

⁸The gaiety of the tambourines is stilled, the noise of the revelers has stopped, the joyful harp is silent.

⁹No longer do they drink wine with a song; the beer is bitter to its drinkers.

¹⁰The ruined city lies desolate; the entrance to every house is barred.

¹¹In the streets they cry out for wine; all joy turns to gloom, all gaiety is banished from the earth.

¹²The city is left in ruins, its gate is battered to pieces.

¹³So will it be on the earth and among the nations, as when an olive tree is beaten, or as when gleanings are left after the grape harvest.

¹⁴They raise their voices, they shout for joy;

from the west they acclaim the LORD's majesty.

¹⁵Therefore in the east give glory to the LORD;

exalt the name of the LORD, the God of Israel,

in the islands of the sea.

¹⁶From the ends of the earth we hear singing:

"Glory to the Righteous One."

But I said, "I waste away, I waste away! Woe to me!

The treacherous betray!

With treachery the treacherous betray!"

¹⁷Terror and pit and snare await you, O people of the earth.

¹⁸Whoever flees at the sound of terror

will fall into a pit; whoever climbs out of the pit will be caught in a snare.

The floodgates of the heavens are opened, the foundations of the earth shake.

¹⁹The earth is broken up, the earth is split asunder, the earth is thoroughly shaken.

²⁰The earth reels like a drunkard, it sways like a hut in the wind; so heavy upon it is the guilt of its rebellion that it falls—never to rise again.

21In that day the LORD will punish the powers in the heavens above and the kings on the earth below.
22They will be herded together like prisoners bound in a dungeon; they will be shut up in prison and be punished after many days.
23The moon will be abashed, the sun ashamed; for the LORD Almighty will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before its elders, gloriously.

Original Meaning

WE TURN NOW from the particularities of the oracles against the nations to a more general treatment of Yahweh's control of time and space and thus his ultimate trustworthiness. The general treatment extends from chapters 24 to 27. In chapters 13–23 the nations could be thought of as the main actors with the Lord in the position of reacting to them. Thus, one could get the idea that the nations are somehow originators of the events of history. Chapters 24–27 correct that impression. God is the sovereign actor on the

stage of history. All things come from him, and all things must eventually return to him. He created time, and he will bring it to an end.

Because these chapters focus especially on the end of time, they are sometimes referred to as "Isaiah's Apocalypse." However, a comparison with Daniel, the intertestamental Jewish apocalypses, and the book of Revelation demonstrates that this material is not really in the genre of apocalypse. It lacks the fantastic imagery, color, and numerology that tend to characterize that genre. At the most it might be called preapocalyptic. It is certainly eschatological, in that it deals with the last things, but it lacks the kind of mysterious imagery that needs a special revelation in order to understand its significance.

There are two recurrences that run throughout the four chapters. There is also a measure of contrast in the recurrences. (1) The first is of songs and singing. The contrast is between the silenced songs of the ruthless (24:8–9; 25:5) and the jubilant songs of the redeemed (24:14, 16; 26:1, 19; 27:2). (2) The other is of city, with a contrast between the city of the ruthless (24:10, 12; 25:2–3, 12; 27:10), which is destroyed, and the city of God (26:1, also referred to as "this mountain," 25:6, 7, 10; 27:13), which is redeemed and secure. The line of thought in the chapters moves from the destruction of the "earth" (ch. 24) to the promise of restoration for God's people (ch. 27). Between these two poles is the dramatic assertion that God's deliverance is not only for his own people but for all nations who will turn to him (ch. 25). Chapter 26 is both an assertion of trust in God and a prayer for him to deliver a people helpless to deliver itself.²

Like chapter 6, chapter 24 can be understood either as part of what precedes it or of what follows it. In that sense, it is an excellent transitional piece. This chapter does give a general summary to what was said in particular detail in chapters 13–23: The entire earth is under God's judgment. The fact that chapters 13–14 open the section with something of a worldwide focus lends further support to that idea. Indeed, if chapters 25–27 did not follow chapter 24, there would be no question that it was intended to be read as a conclusion to chapters 13–23. However, those chapters do follow, and that makes it more difficult to include chapter 24 in a unit with the preceding chapters. As already noted, the recurrence of "city" and "song" unites it to chapters 25–27, as does the central focus on the Lord's activity. Thus, it seems best to read chapter 24 with chapters 25–

27 but to recognize that the entire block of material has been inserted here in order to put chapters 13–23 into a worldwide context.³

The Destruction of the Earth (24:1–13)

THERE CAN BE NO question of the focus of chapter 24 the destruction of the "earth." The word "earth" occurs no less than sixteen times in these twenty-three verses.⁴ Nor is there any question as to who will bring this destruction about: the Lord (24:1, 3, 21). Verses 1–3 underline the universal nature of this judgment. Everyone will be subject to it, and no one will be exempt. This is established in verse 2 with the use of complimentary pairs, such as "priest" and "people" or "mistress" and "maid." Neither gender, nor rank, nor function will permit any to escape what God is bringing on the earth.⁵

But why is this destruction coming? Is it the result of divine pique or the need to demonstrate divine power? Neither. Instead, it is the result of the choices that earth's inhabitants have made. Verses 4–13 use one of the common images of this early part of the book to make this statement: the vine (cf. 5:1–7; 16:8–10; 27:2–6). The earth "dries up" and "withers" (24:4) like a vine (24:7). All the merry-making associated with the wine harvest and the making of the first new wine is stilled. Why? Because earth's inhabitants have "disobeyed the laws" of life. They have "broken the everlasting covenant" (24:5).

At first glance this language seems strange. References to "laws," "statutes," and "covenant" sound much like language regarding Israel, but this is not Israel, it is the world. What is the point? How can the inhabitants of the earth be held accountable for what was exclusively revealed to the Israelites? In fact, like Paul in Romans 1, Isaiah insists that apart from the Sinai covenant, there are laws that God the Creator has written on the human conscience. Thus, he will not admit any argument of ignorance as justification for sin.

Implicit here is the understanding that humans know enough to behave better than they do. There are common standards of human behavior; if we violate them, we do so to our own destruction. The "covenant" referred to here may be the Noachic covenant of Genesis 9:1–17 with its prohibition of bloodshed. Here again is an understanding between the creature and the Creator that is not dependent on special revelation. Rather, it has been passed down through the ages as common human heritage.

Thus, judgment is not coming on the earth because the gods have decided that humans are too noisy, as in the Sumerian flood story, or because one god has flown into a rage at a petty slight, as is the case in some other myths. Destruction is coming because humans have violated the terms of their creation. Israel's God is the Creator of all the nations, and they are accountable to him, and him alone. One of the features of covenants was the custom of the parties calling down curses on themselves for failure to keep the covenant. That is what has happened to earth's inhabitants: They are under a "curse" and bear "guilt" for what they have done (Isa. 24:6).

Dried up like a vine cut off from its roots, the "city" of earth (24:10, 12) lies silent and desolate. The forced and artificial gaiety induced by alcohol (24:7, 9, 11) vanishes like a vapor before the awful realities of judgment and destruction. Despite the effort of some commentators to argue that a specific city (e.g., Jerusalem or Babylon) is intended in these references, it seems clear that this is not the case. Rather, the earth as a whole is treated under the image of "city." It is easy to see why this might be the case. The city offers wealth, glamour, excitement, pleasure, intrigue, and power—all the things humans are prone to sell their souls for. But as mighty and alluring as the city of earth is, a day of harvest is coming when all the fruit will be stripped off and nothing will be left of all the riches that earthlings thought were their own (24:13).

A Dramatic Contrast (24:14–18a)

THESE VERSES ARE something of a riddle because of the dramatic contrast between verses 14–16a and verses 16b–18a. Either one by itself can be justified in this passage without difficulty, but their juxtaposition causes a problem. The first segment speaks of overflowing shouts of "joy" coming from the ends of the earth because of the "glory" and "majesty" of the Lord. That is not out of place as a response to the righteous judgment of God (cf. 30:29–33). But this is immediately followed with an unidentified "I" (the prophet?) protesting that he is wasting away because of the "treachery" and "terror" that characterize the earth.

What are we to make of this? The great variety of proposals and even the number of different readings in the versions prohibit any degree of dogmatism. But it seems most likely to me that the first segment is the cry of joy from those who have been oppressed by the evil earth-city. They are

looking joyously at the end of the story. But the prophet cannot move so quickly beyond the present dark realities. He sees all the horrors that must take place before that final resolution, and he is stricken by them. We have seen this feature elsewhere in this book, beginning as early as the end of chapter 1. The prophet will not let the joyful promises of the future hide the awful present realities that must be dealt with before the promises can be realized.⁷

The Entire Creation Subject to God (24:18b-23)

THE IMAGERY OF 24:18b–20 is reminiscent of the description of the Flood in Genesis 6. The heavens open up, and such a weight of water pours out that the earth is literally torn apart under it. The solid earth, which seems so enduring, shakes, "reels," and "sways." But the water is only an image. The real weight that crushes the earth is the "guilt of its rebellion" (Isa. 24:20). Again the issue is clear, as it has been from the earliest verses of the book: the human problem of rebellion against God. We refuse to bow to the Lord of glory. He defined the terms of our existence when he created us, but we refuse to abide by those terms. As a result, creation itself is marred (Gen. 3:17–19) and must eventually be replaced (Isa. 65:17).

Isaiah 24:21–23 expand the theme from the earth to the entire creation. People in the ancient world considered the "powers in the heavens" (24:21) —that is, the stars, the sun, and the moon—to be deities. But the God of Israel insists they are not. They are just as much subject to his power and to his creation laws as any king on earth is (cf. 40:26). If God chooses, he can turn off their light and shut them up in a dark "dungeon" (24:22). Their light is not eternal. It came on once, at the word of God (Gen. 1:3, 14–19), and he can easily turn it off again. In fact, compared to the light of the eternal, uncreated One, "the LORD Almighty," their light is something to be ashamed of (Isa. 24:23; see also Joel 2:31; Matt. 24:29; Rev. 6:12–13).

This final verse of Isaiah 24 provides a transition to chapter 25. All the powers in creation that may have claimed lordship, whether divine or human, have been put down; there is only One who has the right to be called King of the universe. Where will be the seat of his rule? On some distant star? No, he will rule on "Mount Zion," and the "elders" of "Jerusalem," persons who are condemned elsewhere in the book (1:23;

3:14; 9:15), will be his courtiers (see also Rev. 4:4, 9–11). Thus, we are prepared for the shift to hope that occurs in the following chapter.

Bridging Contexts

ANCIENT COSMOLOGY—AND MODERN. For the ancient pagans the cosmos was unchanging. The heavens and the earth were the parents who had engendered us, and they would go on forever. To be sure, they had had a beginning because all life has beginnings, but they had existed forever in the chaotic matter that is the eternal stuff. The idea of progress or development was foreign to the Canaanites and the other neighbors of the Hebrews. There is change, of course, but the change is always repeating itself. So humans are constantly changing from infancy to childhood to adulthood to senescence, but the human race is going nowhere. The same is true for nature and for the gods: Change is only an endless cycle, repeating the same things again and again.

Thus, the ancients could not think of a time when the cosmos would cease to exist or would exist in a radically changed form. Thus, the system of nature was the given that the ancients started with when trying to imagine deity. It was the cosmos and its characteristics that determined who the gods were and what they looked like. To be sure, the gods were supposedly the ones the earth reflected, but it was the characteristics of earth that defined the nature and characteristics of the gods.

The modern conceptions of reality are not much different. True, we have depersonalized the cosmos, but one wonders how long that will remain so, given the significant voices around us (including many in the church) arguing for the need to recapture the "spiritual" side of nature. But apart from that depersonalization, modern concepts do not form much of an advance over those we first see among the ancient Sumerians in the lower Mesopotamian valley five thousand years ago. Like them, many believe that matter has always existed, first in an "undifferentiated" (chaotic) form. Like them, many believe that matter predates spirit and that spirit has emerged from matter. Like them, many believe that the cosmos is eternal.

For much of the last century cosmologists believed in a "steady state" universe, where no real change occurred. Recently, with the Hubble telescope in space, many scientists have concluded that the Sumerians were

right. Our present universe had a beginning when eternal matter finally contracted to the point of critical mass and exploded in the "Big Bang." Since that beginning, the universe has been constantly changing. But like the thoughtful people of the ancient Near East, they believe the change is not leading anywhere. The universe will expand to a certain point and then fall back in on itself and start all over again—just as human beings do.

Perhaps this will help us to see just how radical the biblical claim is, both then and now. Far from having his characteristics determined by the constantly cycling cosmos, the God of the Bible is the Lord of the cosmos. Far from the earth determining his characteristics, he has set the standards for earth, standards it does not reach! That is significant. Where do such standards come from? Not from the earth, because the earth does not live in the way God calls for. Is it possible that the direction of biblical religion is just what it claims—revelation from the One who made the earth? I do not believe there is any other satisfactory explanation for this phenomenon.

Thus, the idea that God could destroy the earth and put the sun, moon, and stars in a dark dungeon was a shocking idea in the ancient world. The thought that he could interrupt the endless cycles of time and do a new thing such as had never occurred before was unthinkable. It flew in the face of every cherished truth that the greatest thinkers of earth thought they knew. But such is biblical revelation, as testified by Isaiah here.

Contemporary Significance

CLOSING THE CURTAIN ON EARTH'S STAGE. The truth of this chapter still flies in the face of what cosmologists are sure they know. When the well-known astronomer Carl Sagan was dying of cancer and Christian believers wrote to him, telling him they were praying for him, he responded kindly, thanking them for their concern but insisting that there is nothing beyond the physical universe. To believe that there is a reality outside of the limitations of our experience and knowledge is still too much for us.

Yet that is exactly what the Bible says. It insists that God existed before the universe did and that he brought it into existence as part of a prior plan. (The refrain, "God saw that it was good" presupposes a plan to which the result conforms.) Furthermore, God had a plan for the conduct of the earth: Humans, who shared his holy character, were to cultivate it so that it could

reach its highest potential for blessing. Now, although that plan has not changed, sin has entered the picture, and it constantly frustrates the plan. Thus, the earth as it now exists does not define the character and nature of God. He is other than the earth, both in essence and in character.

One evidence of this can be found in the law codes of every civilization, both ancient and modern. To pick just two, why does every civilization prohibit lying and stealing? Someone may say, "Well, that's obvious! There can be no civilization where everybody lies and steals. Existence maybe, but not harmonious civilization." But that is precisely my point. Why can there be no civilization where everybody lies and steals? It is not because not lying and not stealing are our normal way of behaving. The opposite is the case. No one ever had to teach a child to lie or to steal. What we have to struggle hard to do is to teach our children to tell the truth and to share. So if truth-telling and respecting the possessions of others is a necessity for the existence of a harmonious social organization and yet are not things we "naturally" do, what else can we conclude but that these behaviors are determined not by our natures but by the nature of the One who created us? There is One outside of our existence whose character is not reflective of ours.⁸

So what is God to do with a creation that has gone badly astray from its original purpose? He could simply destroy the earth and start over again. But Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds (Matt. 13:24–30) succinctly shows us that is not what God wants or intends. Both his justice and his mercy come into play. He will not destroy the weeds until the wheat has had a chance to grow and mature.

We may also think of God's words to Abraham in Genesis 15. He could not give the land of the Canaanites to Abraham's descendants until the "sin of the Amorites [Canaanites] has reached its full measure" (Gen. 15:16). It would be unjust to destroy the nation until its sin had reached irreparable proportions. That seems to be the case with humanity as a whole and the cosmos it has infected: God will not bring the world to its end until the full harvest of both sin and righteousness has been reached. As we look at the horrors of the twentieth century, we may wonder just how much longer we can possibly have, and we may question with a shudder what the sins of the future will be like if those of the past century were not the "full measure."

But until the end comes, we must continually relearn the lessons of this chapter. Especially as we grow older, it becomes easier and easier to believe that this world is all there is. Yes, we may mouth the words of faith and even tell ourselves we believe them, but we more and more act as if this world is our true home and that this world defines God. Children do not have this problem. Wordsworth expressed it this way:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star
Hath had elsewhere its setting
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!

The child has no difficulty believing in the invisible, and that is no accident. He or she has not been long enough in a body to have his or her spirit become confined. But such thinking is profoundly subversive in the modern age, with its conviction that matter precedes spirit. If we believe the Bible, we must know that Wordsworth is correct, and we must do everything in our power to counteract that conviction, which Paul titles with the catchall term "the flesh" (sarx). Sarx is a compound of two attitudes: (1) that satisfying bodily desire is really all that matters in life, and (2) that I am the only one who can really satisfy my desires, and I have an absolute right to do so.

These two together constitute *sarx*.¹⁰ Paul says that the only way to deal with this double attitude is by death (Col. 3:5). We must die to it both in a once-for-all manner and in daily renunciation of it. Something as simple as daily personal worship is profoundly helpful in keeping us oriented to the truth that this world and the material things in it are not eternal. Only God is eternal, and he will one day bring down the curtain on earth's stage. It will be too late to get ready for that day when it arrives. Either we are ready every day, or we are not ready at all.

Isaiah 25:1–12

¹O LORD, YOU are my God; I will exalt you and praise your name, for in perfect faithfulness you have done marvelous things, things planned long ago.

²You have made the city a heap of rubble, the fortified town a ruin,

the foreigners' stronghold a city no more; it will never be rebuilt.

³Therefore strong peoples will honor you; cities of ruthless nations will revere you.

⁴You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat.

For the breath of the ruthless is like a storm driving against a wall ⁵and like the heat of the desert.

You silence the uproar of foreigners; as heat is reduced by the shadow of a cloud,

so the song of the ruthless is stilled.

⁶On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines.

⁷On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; ⁸he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth.

The LORD has spoken.

⁹In that day they will say,

"Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the LORD, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation."

10 The hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain; but Moab will be trampled under him as straw is trampled down in the manure.

¹¹They will spread out their hands in it, as a swimmer spreads out his hands to swim.

God will bring down their pride despite the cleverness of their hands. ¹²He will bring down your high fortified walls and lay them low; he will bring them down to the ground, to the very dust.

Original Meaning

As I have said previously, the book of Isaiah makes it clear that judgment and destruction are never God's intended last words. Rather, he intends that those harsh words will pave the way for the happier words of hope and

redemption. This is the case in Isaiah 24 and 25. From the silence of the shattered city, we move to the joy of a feast where the host is the Lord.

Initially, the note of praise sounds like the praise we expect from redeemed Israel. Her Lord has been faithful to his promises and has "done marvelous things" (25:1). He has completely destroyed the "city" of the wicked and the oppressors (25:2) and in so doing has become a "refuge for the poor [and] the needy" from "the breath of the ruthless" (25:4–5). But in 25:3 is the hint of a significant addition to this picture. The guests at the coronation feast are not merely the people of God rejoicing in their deliverance from "the strong peoples" and "the ruthless nations." In fact, representatives of those very peoples are present at the feast as well, honoring and revering (lit., fearing) the Lord. Redemption and deliverance are not for Israel alone but for all peoples who turn to God in faith and humility.

This theme is developed in 25:6–9. There is no sense in which God glories in the destruction of the wicked (cf. Ezek. 18:23; 33:11). He does not wipe his hands with a sigh of relief and say, "I'm glad that's over." If judgment and destruction cannot be avoided in the end in the name of justice, that is not what God wants to do. Rather, he wants to invite "all peoples" (Isa. 25:6) to his feast. Nor is the "all" merely accidental, for it is repeated no less than four more times in 25:7–8. The author wants us to know that everyone on earth is invited to the celebration.

What is the occasion of that celebration? Oftentimes a king would hold a great feast at a time when he wished to make a special pronouncement. That is the case here. At this great feast where the very finest of foods (25:6) have been put before his guests, the host announces a new dispensation. The "death" that has ruled the earth since Adam and Eve, drenching it with tears, is going to be swallowed up. The "shroud" that has covered "all nations" will be removed (25:7), and the tears that have stained every face will be wiped away (25:8). No longer will there be a division between those who believe in the one God ("his people") and those who do not. Rather, it will become apparent that the faith the Israelites put in God, which seemed so misplaced to the idol worshipers (a "disgrace"), was in fact the truth (25:8). The Holy One of Israel is the one God of the whole earth. When he finally declares the rule of death to be at an end, his sole lordship will become crystal clear.

Verse 9 emphasizes once again the overarching theme of chapters 7–39: the trustworthiness of God. If the nation of unclean lips (cf. 6:5) is to bear a message of hope and redemption to the world, then, like the prophet of unclean lips, they must have a revelation of the supremely trustworthy character of God. So at the great feast in Mount Zion, what will "they"—not only Israel but also the redeemed from all peoples—say? "Surely this is our God; we trusted² in him, and he saved us." In other words, they will praise God for his trustworthiness.

God can be trusted when nothing and no one else on earth can. If we trust the nations of humanity instead of God, they will turn on us and destroy us. But why should we trust them in the first place? They are all subject to God and will be judged at his bar of judgment. They cannot save us if they would. Their only hope is the same as ours: the trustworthiness of God.

But the thought of this unit does not end on this glorious note. Instead, it turns to a stunning contrast—so stunning that some commentators argue it does not belong here.³ However, it does fit with the characteristic we have already seen several times in the book (as recently as 24:14–16), namely, the prophet's tendency to turn back from glorious promises of the future to the grim realities of the present. Furthermore, we have noted his penchant for graphic illustrations of a point, and this segment is nothing if not graphic.

If this understanding of the material is correct, what point is being made? It is similar to the one made in Exodus 34:6–7:

The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.

Yes, God is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry, and quick to forgive. But no one dare presume on that grace to live a profligate life, assuming God will not notice. Sin *will* be punished, and its deadly consequences will not be immediately curtailed.

That is the point being made here. Yes, God intends to make his salvation available to all persons from all nations. He intends to remove the shroud of death from all people, not just those he chose as his own. But there is *one* qualification. Those benefits are available to all who abandon their trust in themselves or in any other created thing; they are not available to those who persist in "pride" (Isa. 25:11) or who trust in their own mighty achievements (25:12). So if the end of time will be marked by a great feast where God's blessings will be made available to all, it will also be marked by terrible destruction on those who refuse to turn to God in trust. Destruction is not God's intended last word, but we have the choice of making it his last word.

The language of 25:10b–11 is difficult, so it is not possible to be sure about some of the imagery. The general picture, however, is clear. Moab, representing all who oppose ultimate reality, instead of having the shroud of death removed from his face, finds himself face down in a barnyard of liquid manure. If the NIV reading "under him" is correct, then the contrast between those who trust God and those who refuse to do so is made more explicit. The former experience his hand of blessing upon them (25:10a) while the latter are "trampled" under his feet (25:10b). They will "spread out their hands" to swim in the manure, but despite all their skills, they will be unable to save themselves.

As in 24:20, the weight of the guilt of rebellion is simply too heavy. All the human achievements in which we are inclined to trust will be brought down into the "dust." We should not think that "Moab" is worse than any other nation here. They have simply been singled out to represent the rest of the proud human race that refuses to recognize the right and authority of their Maker.⁸ Edom is used in the same way in Isaiah 34 as the conclusion to chapters 13–33.

Bridging Contexts

PERSONS WHO TRAVEL to Israel are often disappointed to find that Jerusalem is not located on the highest mountain in the area. They have read passages like this one, where Jerusalem is repeatedly referred to as "this mountain," and have formed certain expectations. But the point of this reference is a symbolic one. In the ancient world mountains were considered to be the

homes of the gods. So Mount Olympus in Greece or Mount Cassius in Syria was felt to be an especially holy place. Here God is saying that there is really only one "holy mountain," the place where he, the sole Creator of the universe, has chosen to place his name. Thus, we read elsewhere that Jerusalem will be made the highest of the mountains (cf. Zech. 14:10), and Isaiah speaks not only here but on three other occasions about all the nations coming to worship God on the "holy mountain" of Jerusalem (Isa. 2:3; 27:13; 66:20). Thus, Jerusalem's prominence is not a geographic one but a spiritual one.

Many modern Western, largely urbanized readers will find the language of 25:10–12 concerning Moab shocking and disgusting. At the same time, such people can munch on popcorn while watching horror movies where the blood seems almost to flow out of the movie or television screen. The people of biblical times would find that shocking. While it is important to recognize that there was a shock value intended in this description, we must also remember that rural people of all times and places can be matter-of-fact about some of the grosser and cruder elements of life that tend to send more urbanized people reeling. What biblical people find truly shocking is the casual and thoughtless brutality that all too often characterizes urban life.

Contemporary Significance

DEATH AND RESURRECTION. This chapter puts the choices that face the human race in bold relief. No matter what we may have done to one another, if we will turn to God in trust, there is hope for us. Death, the last enemy, has been conquered. But if we insist that we need no redemption, that we can take care of ourselves, God himself will assist the death angel as he carries us off.

This passage has one of the clearest teachings on resurrection in the Old Testament. As such it speaks to the greatest issue in the modern world—the issue of death. Given the insistence today that this world and this life are all there is, death makes a mockery of the whole thing. All our achievements and accomplishments, all our struggles and pain, are meaningless because, as the Preacher says, we all die, the saint and the sinner, the winner and the loser together (Eccl. 9:3–4). Death takes away the possibility of individual human significance. The only alternative is to say that humanity will go on

after I die and that therefore I have some significance as a part of the race. But that is my only significance, and a very small one.

This is, of course, exactly where paganism enters. Individuals do not count for anything. It is only as they conform to some ideal conception of humanity that they matter at all. Our individual differences are erased in death and so are insignificant. The one small hope that our individuality might survive is if ancestor worship can be sufficiently inculcated.

Death not only destroys the idea of individual worth, it also destroys the idea of moral values. What does it matter what you or I do, since death is going to get us all in the end? The only thing that matters is a maximum of comfort, pleasure, security, and power so that I can escape death as long as possible. If this world is all there is and death marks the end of any meaningful existence, then there is no right or wrong, and no activity has any real meaning. But because our silly spirits crave meaning, we each have to create it in any way we can, all the time knowing that the meaning we are creating is itself meaningless. This is where the "existentialist" philosophers arrived in the middle of the last century, and their thinking has filtered down to the average person today.

But this chapter and its fulfillment in the New Testament tell us that the existentialist idea is false. We have not been created for death but for life. Death has lost its sting, and the grave has been robbed of its victory (1 Cor. 15:55). God the Father has defeated death forever in the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. To be sure, we await the final day when the King will make his promised pronouncement and death will cease to be. But until then we can live in the assurance that we do have individual significance and that death cannot destroy that. Furthermore, we can know that trust in God and renunciation of our pride are ultimate values that will make all the difference in whether we conquer death or death conquers us.

When will that pronouncement occur? The book of Revelation gives us more details. The feast of the King portrayed here will be the wedding supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7–9). It is the feast of the Lamb because it is through his death and resurrection that death is conquered. This imagery extends back to Exodus, when a lamb's death made it possible for the firstborn of Israel to escape death in Egypt (Ex. 12:12–13). So it is not accidental that Jesus instructed those who follow him to eat his flesh and drink his blood (John 6:53–56). He was consciously associating himself

with the Passover lamb. But because death could not conquer him and the Father has raised him to new life, "the Lamb who was slain" (Rev. 5:12; cf. 13:8) is alive to be both host and groom at the last day.

Immediately following the announcement of the wedding supper of the Lamb in Revelation 19 is a discussion of the conquest of death, culminating in the statement in 20:14 that "death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire," and in 21:4 that "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." It is significant that the imagery of Christ changes from Lamb to Conqueror immediately after the announcement of the wedding supper. He rides on a white horse (19:11) and leads the armies of heaven (19:14) to a great battle, which is called "the great supper of God" (19:17), when the vultures eat the corpses of those who have opposed the King (19:21).

We think here immediately of what Isaiah said about Moab. Death will be conquered and destroyed, but those who refuse the offer of the Lamb will be met by the Conqueror and will go down to a worse fate than death, namely, "the second death" (Rev. 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8). God offers deliverance from death to all, but those who refuse his offer will find an eternity of torment.

Isaiah 26:1-27:1

IN THAT DAY this song will be sung in the land of Judah:

We have a strong city; God makes salvation its walls and ramparts.

²Open the gates that the righteous nation may enter, the nation that keeps faith.

³You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you.

⁴Trust in the LORD forever, for the LORD, the LORD, is the Rock eternal.

⁵He humbles those who dwell on high, he lays the lofty city low; he levels it to the ground and casts it down to the dust.

⁶Feet trample it down the feet of the oppressed, the footsteps of the poor.

⁷The path of the righteous is level;
O upright One, you make the way of
the righteous smooth.
⁸Yes, LORD, walking in the way of your
laws,
we wait for you;
your name and renown
are the desire of our hearts.

⁹My soul yearns for you in the night; in the morning my spirit longs for you.

When your judgments come upon the earth, the people of the world learn righteousness.

10 Though grace is shown to the wicked, they do not learn righteousness; even in a land of uprightness they go on doing evil and regard not the majesty of the LORD.

¹¹O LORD, your hand is lifted high, but they do not see it.

Let them see your zeal for your people and be put to shame; let the fire reserved for your enemies consume them.

¹²LORD, you establish peace for us; all that we have accomplished you have done for us.

¹³O LORD, our God, other lords besides you have ruled over us, but your name alone do we honor.

¹⁴They are now dead, they live no more; those departed spirits do not rise.

You punished them and brought them to ruin;

you wiped out all memory of them.

¹⁵You have enlarged the nation, O LORD; you have enlarged the nation.

You have gained glory for yourself; you have extended all the borders of the land.

¹⁶LORD, they came to you in their distress; when you disciplined them, they could barely whisper a prayer.

¹⁷As a woman with child and about to give birth writhes and cries out in her pain, so were we in your presence, O LORD.

¹⁸We were with child, we writhed in pain, but we gave birth to wind.

We have not brought salvation to the earth;

we have not given birth to people of the world.

19But your dead will live;
their bodies will rise.
You who dwell in the dust,
wake up and shout for joy.
Your dew is like the dew of the morning;
the earth will give birth to her dead.

²⁰Go, my people, enter your rooms and shut the doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until his wrath has passed by.
²¹See, the LORD is coming out of his dwelling to punish the people of the earth for their sins.

The earth will disclose the blood shed upon her; she will conceal her slain no longer. ^{27:1}In that day,

the LORD will punish with his sword, his fierce, great and powerful sword, Leviathan the gliding serpent, Leviathan the coiling serpent; he will slay the monster of the sea.

Original Meaning

CHAPTERS 26 AND 27 (both are labeled as songs, 26:1; 27:2) seem to reflect on chapters 24 and 25. Chapter 26 focuses on the way in which the city perceives itself and its role in the world in the light of who God really is. Thus, it becomes an affirmation of trust and a call for God to demonstrate his sovereignty through his people. Chapter 27 concludes the section with a promise of return and restoration for Israel, making special use of the imagery of a vineyard.

As chapter 26 is now constructed, there are three units of thought: thanks for God's deliverance (vv. 1–6), dependence on God (vv. 7–19), and promises to the faithful (26:20–27:1). The second segment (26:7–19) seems to begin on a positive note of trust in God but then moves to a more negative confession of failure to have made a real difference in the world. It is difficult to ascertain whether there is a single line of thought or whether several related thoughts have been brought together.

Thanks for God's Deliverance (26:1–6)

THE OPENING SONG of thanks picks up themes from chapters 24–25. Instead of the silent and ruined city of the earth (26:5), there is now the city of God, peopled with the faithful singing his praises (26:1–2). This city has the "salvation" of God for "walls," making it plain that it is a state of mind more than a geographical place. Instead of the closed gates of a city fearful of attack, it has the open gates of confidence. But the gates are not open to everyone. They are open to those who choose to live in the ethical righteousness of the covenant. As in Psalm 15:1–5; 24:3–10; 118:19–20, the key is not ritual purity but a kind of behavior that mirrors that of the King. One is able to behave in this way because of a complete inner integrity (Heb. *šalom*) that stems from complete dependence on God: "trust" (Isa. 26:3).

Once again, the main theme of this entire subdivision (chs. 7–39) is trust in the Lord, not in the nations. This trust is eminently justified because the Lord is as secure as a "rock" that is "eternal" (26:4) and because he will bring the "lofty city" of earth down into the dust (26:5–6). The Lord is the eternal Rock, whereas the city, the symbol of all earthly power, is crushed into dust. Ultimately, the city will be brought down by the very people who were oppressed by it. God puts the high and the mighty under the humble

and lowly. Since the meek will inherit the earth (Ps. 37:11), it makes no sense to put one's faith in the mighty of the earth.

Dependence on God (26:7–19)

IN 26:7–11 THE prophet asks God to speed that day of retribution. He begins by talking about the "path" or way of life on which God calls the "righteous" to walk. It is not crooked or misleading. It is not filled with snares and traps. Instead, it is "level" and "smooth" (26:7; cf. Moses' words in Deut. 10:12). God does not ask his people to do things that are bizarre or hurtful to themselves. He only asks them to live in the way they were made for.

The righteous gladly accept the way of God's "laws" (*mipaim*, "regulations") for two reasons. (1) It is the way in which believers express trust ("wait") in the Lord. They do not say they trust God and then rush ahead to take care of themselves in ways that violate God's desires, his regulations for fruitful living. (2) God's honor and reputation have become the believers' deepest desire (26:8).² They want to live in a way that will bring honor to him and not disgrace.

This thought is deepened in verse 9. "Morning" and "night" the believer's passionate longing is for God. But the context makes it clear that it is not merely an emotional feeling that is wanted. Rather, it is the manifestation of God's character in one's life. The repetition of *mipaim* (NIV "judgments") in this verse makes this clear. What Isaiah is praying for is the expression of God's regulations both in individual human lives and on the larger world scene. He is longing for the ethical evidence of God's presence to be unmistakably seen, because this is the only way "the people of the world" will learn what is right.

Verses 10–11 express a profound truth. In the absence of repentance, "grace" may be actually counterproductive. Unless the "wicked" experience the results of their having broken God's just regulations for life, his "judgments," they will persist in "doing evil." If they do not experience the consequences of their behavior, they will see no reason to change. The good of others means nothing to them. Thus, the prophet calls on God to demonstrate his justice to the wicked nations by redeeming his "people." To be sure, many of God's people have sinned and brought God's wrath on themselves, as expressed through conquest by the nations. But the nations

have not seen it in that way. They believe they have conquered Israel and Judah simply through their own power and glory, taking whatever they wanted in spite of the Lord (cf. Ezek. 36:18–20). Sooner or later, Isaiah says, God must demonstrate to the world that this is not the case. He must rise up against the wicked on behalf of his people and make the consequences of sin clear.

Verses 12–18 reflect further on this thought. The people have been unable to accomplish God's work in the world, and they call on him to demonstrate his delivering power there. This reflection begins with a testimony of his grace on their behalf in the past (26:12–15). Perhaps it is the period of the judges that is especially in the writer's mind, when God delivered his people from so many different overlords.

Verse 12 is a beautiful affirmation. God is the One who has done everything for his people. He has made it possible for them to have true "peace" and to accomplish significant things. Apart from his grace and goodness, they would have been just one more insignificant people group in the ancient world.

Verses 13–15 then particularize what God has done in and though his people. He has delivered them from various peoples who have ruled over them at one time or another. Those people no longer have a "name" (i.e., an honorable memory, a reputation) in Israel,³ but God's "name" continues to be honored through all time among his people. The reason is that although Israel's enemies have made numerous attempts to wipe out the "nation" and enslave its people, God has frustrated them and "enlarged the nation" in spite of them. None of this is to the glory of Israel and its kings; it is all to the "glory" of God (26:15).

Verses 16–18 continue the previous theme, but the focus changes from the might of God to the helplessness of the people. Verse 16 is difficult, but the basic point seems to be that the people recognize that when the nations triumphed over them, it was because of God's "discipline," not because of the power of the nations. They were helpless under that punishment. Like a woman with a false pregnancy, who goes into labor but has nothing to deliver, they struggled and struggled but were unable to deliver themselves or anyone else.

This last thought in verse 18 is an interesting one. We would expect it to say that they were unable to save themselves from the oppression of the

world. But in fact the actual statement in both parts of the parallel appears to be that they have been unable to bring salvation into the world. The prophet is perhaps reflecting here on Israel's larger mission to be a blessing on the nations. This, of course, first appeared in God's promises to Abraham (Gen. 12:3). But, as we have seen, it is also a significant part of Isaiah's own message, which may explain its presence here. Not only does he long to see God's justice applied to the world in regard to Israel (Isa. 26:9–11), he also wants to see God's salvation made available to the world through Israel.

Verse 19 is another example of a transition in Isaiah that can be read either with the preceding material or the following. In one sense it concludes what has just been said. In verse 18, the prophet, speaking for the people, has confessed their impotence in carrying out God's program in the world. They have failed him and been forced to submit to the discipline of destruction by the nations. They have been unable to recover from that discipline on their own. They are helpless, laboring as in childbirth but to no effect. But in verse 19 the prophet, speaking for God, tells them not to despair. Though years have passed and many of the faithful have died, with no effect either on the nation and the world, death does not have the last word; God does.

As in chapter 25, resurrection is seen as the final answer to all of earth's questions. If it were true that death conquers all, there would be no reason to live a life faithful and committed to God; it would make so little difference in the outcome of world events. But death does not conquer all. Those who have gone down into "the dust" in death "will rise." "The earth" will give up the "dead," and then it will be demonstrated that the life of faith was not in vain.

Promises to the Faithful (26:20–27:1)

But it is also possible for verse 19 to be read with verses 20–21. In view of the promise of the resurrection, the people do not need to fear that God has forsaken them in his "wrath" (v. 20). Instead, they can trust in his protective covering until his judgment on the nations, the judgment they requested (26:9–11), has passed. There are allusions here to both Noah (Gen. 6:13–14) and the Passover (Ex. 12:21–24). God will take care of his own and protect them from final harm.

But again, as in Isa. 25:10–12, there will be a final judgment. The assurance of protection for the faithful and a resurrection to new life cannot obscure the fact that the iniquity (NIV "sins") of earth's "people," that inner twisted sinfulness that ultimately expresses itself in murder (lit., "its bloodshed"), will not go unpunished. God will demonstrate to "the people of the earth" the very things called for in the earlier verses of the chapter. He will show that he is the One who has set the terms of existence. Just as we find at the end of the book (Isa. 66:24), grace does not wipe out justice. Those who will not use grace to enable themselves to turn about and live according to God's regulations will find that justice is inescapable.

Isaiah 27:1 is another slippery transitional verse. It could introduce what follows in 27:2, as is indicated by the chapter break in the Hebrew (followed by the English versions). If so, it introduces the destruction of all opposition so that God can truly protect his vineyard. But at the same time, it can serve as a graphic illustration of what was just said in 26:21, something we have seen Isaiah do several times previously (3:16–4:1; 5:1–25; 25:10–12). The repetition of the verb "punish" in both 26:21 and 27:1 supports this idea. There also seems to be a more direct similarity of thought between these two verses than between 27:1 and 27:2–11.

The illustration that is used in 27:1 is almost certainly taken from Canaanite mythology, in which the chaos monster is a sea serpent named Leviathan. Leviathan is destroyed by one of the gods so that order can prevail. This is one form of a story that was widely known all over the ancient Near East, with actors having different names but with the same plot. Isaiah is not endorsing the worldview of those myths here. Rather, he is simply making use of emotive images familiar to many in his audience to make his point, much as we today might say, "He is as strong as Hercules," without thereby indicating we believe in the Greek myth.⁸

In this graphic illustration, Isaiah says that no enemy can defeat God's plan and purposes. His people do not need to fear that somehow in the end all they have believed and lived for will fall to the ground. God has already won the victory, and we only await its final consummation.

Bridging Contexts

PERSECUTION. Perhaps in our day there is no more similar context to what is being talked about here than that of the persecuted church around the world. We in the West have known little of what it means to say "other lords besides you have ruled over us, but your name alone do we honor" (26:13). But Christians who have endured persecution under Communist regimes and in Islamic countries resonate clearly with such a statement. The few stories we hear are inspiring. When all the evidence seemed to be that evil had won and faith had been vanquished, these people refused to surrender, and because of them God was able to continue to build his kingdom.

In the Soviet Union, the Methodist church largely disappeared. Only in Estonia did Methodist congregations survive. When we ask the Methodists in Estonia today how that happened, they tell the story of a Methodist superintendent who was required under pain of imprisonment in Siberia to sign over the deeds of his churches to the Russian conquerors. But he refused to do so, saying that they were not his churches but God's and that God's property could never belong to the state. When he was removed, several of the young pastors said to themselves, "If he can be faithful unto death, we can too."

Thus, even though their buildings were taken from them by force, these young men did not give up their callings. They continued to shepherd their flocks in little, out-of-the-way, rented rooms amidst harassment, ridicule, and want. They believed what Isaiah said about the ultimate triumph of God. And by God's grace some of them have lived to see a measure of that triumph. In Pilsen in the Czech Republic, a church was taken by the government and turned into a school for atheism. But in the early 1990s the building was returned to the remnants of the former congregation. What a thrill it is to stand in a former hall of atheism and hear several hundred predominantly young people singing the praises of the true owner of the building.

A similar story can be told in Romania. There, although Christian congregations were allowed to retain their buildings, it was always under great duress. No Christian meeting or any kind of witness was allowed outside of the unmarked church buildings. No Christian was permitted to be in any profession or to attend university. If you wished to be a clerk or a day laborer, then go ahead and confess Christ as your Savior. Pastors were

required to meet with a secret police agent each week and prove that what had been preached the previous Sunday was not in any way subversive. They were effectively isolated from each other because it was known that some of them were informers, but no one knew who these informers were. Nevertheless, these pastors endured the hardships and were faithful, refusing to believe, despite the apparent triumph of state-sponsored atheism, that God was defeated.

Although these pastors endured all kinds of deprivation, God honored them. The churches were full to overflowing. One church, prohibited from expanding and intentionally surrounded by high-rise apartment buildings, simply removed their windows and placed high-powered amplifiers in the openings. People all around went to church! To be in one of those packed churches in the dead of winter, when most of the congregation had walked long distances through the snow and cold to be there, and to hear them sing and pray was a never-to-be-forgotten experience. Like the people in Isaiah 26, they had doubts and fears. They wondered if it was still possible that their faith was in vain and that the deprivations they had endured were for nothing. Yet they persevered, believing in the resurrection and God's eventual triumph over evil in every form, both personal and institutional.

Contemporary Significance

CULTURAL CHANGES. This chapter is about perseverance in spite of hardship and uncertainty. We in the West know little of this. For two hundred years we have experienced a rarity on the face of the earth: a culture profoundly influenced by Christian ethics from top to bottom. To be sure, there was plenty of corruption. But when such was revealed, it was not winked at or taken for granted. It was reviled and rooted out as best as possible. As a result, we have inherited a culture where courtesy and respecting God's law are givens.

Now, however, since the cultural upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, when parents began to abdicate their responsibilities and when the Jesus Movement produced a "feel-good" revival instead of a moral renovation, all that heritage is being fast eroded. Christians are finding themselves more and more marginalized while cultural gurus spend millions of foundation

dollars (often earned by hard-working evangelicals) trying to find out what is the missing glue that once held American society together.

How shall Christians respond to circumstances like these? One of the common ways is to develop a fascination for the "end times." The current popularity of the "Left Behind" series is one example of such fascination. There is a degree of escapism involved because it is hard to keep one's focus when we are neither popular nor overtly persecuted. So we fantasize about a time when everything will be perfectly clear, when the lines will be drawn so that everyone can see them. But these verses in Isaiah are written for just such an ambiguous time as ours, when the lines are not clear. Their prescriptions are just what we need today. They tell us to do five things: Trust God in an active way; honor God's name alone; believe God can do what we cannot; do not let go of the resurrection; and focus on the real enemy.

Trusting God as a way of living. What does it mean to "trust God"? Most of us think of it first as an attitudinal thing. To trust God is not to be anxious. That is surely true. Verse 3 says if our *yeer*, our capacity for imagining, rests on God, we can know perfect peace. In many cases we find it difficult to trust God because our imaginations have been filled with anything else but God. We have allowed the culture around us, through the media domination, to saturate our vision. The result is that many of us know nothing of inner serenity. The scriptural admonition, "Do not be anxious about anything" (Phil. 4:6), becomes almost laughable. We are anxious about everything, most of it far beyond our control.

What must we do? We must first of all guard much more closely what we let into our minds. Paul followed up the admonition just quoted with a further one, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Phil. 4:8). This does not mean we hide our heads in the sand from the opposite of such things. But it does mean we do everything in our power to keep those opposite things from filling our heads. This begins at home. Are our homes places of quiet, beauty, and serenity? Hardly! Many of our homes are places of frantic activity, where cluttered minds reveal themselves in cluttered living spaces. When will Christians admit that we are countercultural and begin to embrace that reality?

But Isaiah 26 also helps us to realize that trusting God has a less cerebral side. Verse 8 instructs us to "wait" for God by "walking in the way of your laws." On the surface, this seems counterintuitive. "Walking" and "waiting" seem contradictory. However, as I pointed out on 25:9, the biblical concept of "waiting" is a way of thinking. It is not doing nothing, but it is doing what you know is right while refusing to run ahead of God to try to solve your problems for yourself. In other words, to trust God is to obey him by following his regulations for life. This is what the writer of the Proverbs is talking about when he says in Proverbs 3:5–6:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.

To trust God is to show we know him in our "paths," that is, by the way we live. We trust God when we are honest in situations where it would be to our advantage to cheat. We trust God when we refuse to break faith with our wife by flirting with a pretty girl who is obviously interested. We trust God when we give valuable time to work for the poor. We wait for the Lord, believing that he will act in our behalf in his own best time, by obeying his *mipaim*, his regulations for life, and not making up our own to serve ourselves as we go along.

In this respect it is important to remind ourselves who those people are who live in the security of the walls of salvation. Who will go through the open gates of God's city? It is the righteous nation that keeps faith (Isa. 26:2). Note Psalm 15:

LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill?

He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from his heart and has no slander on his tongue, who does his neighbor no wrong and casts no slur on his fellowman,
who despises a vile man
but honors those who fear the LORD,
who keeps his oath
even when it hurts,
who lends his money without usury
and does not accept a bribe against the innocent.

He who does these things will never be shaken.

There are two pitfalls to be avoided here. (1) One is the idea that we can earn a place in the city of God by our excessive righteousness. The Bible is clear from beginning to end that this is impossible. The idea that we can is a pharisaic misreading of the Old Testament. Paul turns to the Old Testament for a host of references to support his statement in Romans 3:10 that "there is no one righteous, not even one." There is only one key to the divine city—the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 5:9–10).

(2) The other pitfall is a mirror image of the first, a pitfall that American evangelicals and our offspring in two-thirds of the world are in danger of falling into. It is the one Paul tries to guard against in Romans 6–8: "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" (6:1). There is only one appropriate response to the grace of God in Christ, namely, to allow the Holy Spirit such free rein in our lives that we cease to "walk in the flesh" (Rom. 8:4, NIV "live according to the sinful nature"). We evangelicals are in great danger of saying that since we are saved by grace alone, it does not really matter if we sin a little. No part of the Scripture supports this.

The apostle John agrees with Paul in his statement that Christians have ceased habitual sinning (1 John 3:6). This verse has terrified many a young Christian who has not learned what it means to make a full surrender to the Holy Spirit in faith. But it is not meant to be a word of terror but of hope. Our hands have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus, and they can remain clean through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Honor God's name alone. Verse 13 says that although others have ruled over God's people, the people have honored God's name. Though that certainly was not true of all of them, it was true for the remnant. And

because they put the honor of God's name above everything else, God was able to triumph through them. This must be our attitude as well.

But how can we do that? One way is to be sure that he gets the glory for his achievements in us. Moses was not permitted to enter the Promised Land because he made it appear as if it was his own power that produced water out of the rock (Num. 20:10). He did not sanctify, or give honor to, the name of the Lord. This reminds us that God's "name" is not his label. Rather, it is his nature, his character, his reputation.

Another way we honor the name of the Lord is by demonstrating that he is able to deliver us from whatever may come upon us. God tells the people in Ezekiel 36:20 that they have "profaned my holy name" by going into captivity and giving the Babylonians an opportunity to say, "These are the LORD's people, and yet they had to leave his land." All we have to do to profane God's name is to make it appear as if he is helpless to deliver us. Because the people sinned against God and brought his well-deserved wrath on them, they gave God's enemies an opportunity to say that God could not deliver them.

Thus, the main way to honor God's name is not by raising our hands and singing songs of praise. We do it chiefly when our lives show that he alone is the Holy One and that he is like no one else. This is what we pray for when we repeat the second clause of the Lord's Prayer: "Hallowed be your name" (Luke 11:2). We are asking God to assist us in demonstrating his character in everything we do and say. This is what it means to "honor God's name."

Believe God can do what we cannot. The book of Malachi was written for a time such as ours. The prophet was preparing God's people for that long interlude we now know as "the intertestamental period" (between 400 B.C. and the coming of Christ). All the revelation necessary to prepare for the coming of Christ was concluded with Malachi's prophecy, and now a period of four hundred years would ensue before all the circumstances were right for that coming. During most of that time, the Jews had little control over their political destiny, being ruled by one great power and then another. The glowing promises of the prophets for the time after the Exile had not come true. Already the kinds of jibes reported by Malachi were being said: "Where is the God of justice?" (Mal. 2:17), and "It is futile to

serve God" (3:14). And they would only be said more loudly in some quarters in the days to come.

What is Malachi's (and Isaiah's) prescription? It is to rest in the Lord's ability to do what we cannot do and not to give up believing that he will act (see Isa. 26:11, 20–21). Malachi writes in Malachi 3:16–18:

Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name.

"They will be mine," says the LORD Almighty, "in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him. And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.

In a time when God seems to be doing nothing, believers need to be encouraging one another with the evidence of God's faithful activity in the past and with all the promises that he will not leave us. We refuse to succumb to the temptation to take things into our own hands and instead persevere in faithful living, trusting God to do what we cannot as we trust him.

Hold fast to the resurrection. The key in all of this is the resurrection. If we did not have this certainty, we would be forced to demand that God act "now." But we do not need to make such demands. This is John's point when he has Christ saying, "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Rev. 2:10). If the only rewards for a life of faithfulness are here, then we cannot afford a life of peaceful trust; we must "make it happen." But if the real rewards are on the other side of death, we can well afford such a life. If we have not "brought in the kingdom" as the people confess not to have done in Isaiah 26:18, but we have trusted Christ by living a life of obedience and faith that honors him, we can live confidently, knowing that death has no final ability to hurt us.

As I said in the comments on chapter 25, however, the resurrection awareness is something that must be cultivated, especially in our culture where maintenance of life has become almost cultic. We need periodically to rehearse for ourselves the words of the old spiritual, "This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through." With the strains of heaven playing in our ears, we can live for God, even if we do not see all the promises fulfilled to our own satisfaction. We know that death has been defeated and that life will win in the end.

Focus on the real enemy. One serious danger in times of uncertainty and ambiguity is to begin looking for enemies, for those whom we can blame for our troubles. In times like the present, the church has often been wont to turn to the spirit world and blame the demonic for our difficulties. Isaiah's reference to "Leviathan" (Isa. 27:1) may be an expression of such a thing. Many see "Leviathan" as a code name for Satan. After all, the book of Revelation depicts "an enormous red dragon" (Rev. 12:3) as the enemy of the "woman" (12:1–2, 4–6), who is often identified with the church. But we must be careful at this point. The Bible is clear from beginning to end that the real enemy of God and of his people is not a rebellious spirit being.

Yes, there is such a being, and he opposes God and his people (1 Peter 5:8). But he is not responsible for the existence of sin in the world. Our first mother and father chose to sin against God of their own free will (Gen. 3:6). The snake only asked a leading question and told a lie about God's character. The enemy that God must destroy in the world is moral evil, and that chiefly in ourselves. We must be careful not to excuse immorality of every sort in ourselves ("after all, I'm only human") while becoming engrossed in "spiritual warfare."

Isaiah 27:2-13

IN THAT DAY—

"Sing about a fruitful vineyard:

3I, the LORD, watch over it;
I water it continually.
I guard it day and night
so that no one may harm it.

4I am not angry.
If only there were briers and thorns
confronting me!
I would march against them in battle;
I would set them all on fire.

5Or else let them come to me for refuge;
let them make peace with me,
yes, let them make peace with me."

⁶In days to come Jacob will take root, Israel will bud and blossom and fill all the world with fruit.

⁷Has the LORD struck her as he struck down those who struck her?

Has she been killed as those were killed who killed her?

8By warfare and exile you contend with her

with his fierce blast he drives her out, as on a day the east wind blows.

⁹By this, then, will Jacob's guilt be atoned for,

and this will be the full fruitage of the removal of his sin:

When he makes all the altar stones

to be like chalk stones crushed to pieces, no Asherah poles or incense altars will be left standing. ¹⁰The fortified city stands desolate, an abandoned settlement, forsaken like the desert; there the calves graze, there they lie down; they strip its branches bare. ¹¹When its twigs are dry, they are broken and women come and make fires with them. For this is a people without understanding; so their Maker has no compassion on them. and their Creator shows them no favor.

¹²In that day the LORD will thresh from the flowing Euphrates to the Wadi of Egypt, and you, O Israelites, will be gathered up one by one. ¹³And in that day a great trumpet will sound. Those who were perishing in Assyria and those who were exiled in Egypt will come and worship the LORD on the holy mountain in Jerusalem.

Original Meaning

In the Earlier Chapters in this subdivision (Isa. 24–27), which celebrate God's lordship over history, the songs are those of drunkards trying to forget (24:9), or of ruthless triumph (25:5), or praise for God's security (26:1). The present song is a more intimate one. It praises God for delivering his people and celebrates his personal relationship with them. In this sense it forms the conclusion of the four chapters. The first and second songs (chs. 24 and 25) declare universal judgment and universal salvation.

In the third (ch. 26), the people proclaim their trust in God, but they also confess their inability to deliver themselves and fulfill their ministry in the world. Now, God confirms his promise to deliver them.

Here we have the opposite picture from the one we saw in chapter 5. There God called in the wild animals to destroy the vineyard of bitter grapes, his nation. He tore down the walls and left it to "briers and thorns" (5:6). Now we see the "vineyard" from the other side. God says he is "not angry," and he wishes that there were "briers and thorns" for him to contend with (27:4), so that he could chop them down and burn them. But in a mixing of metaphors, he says the thorns and briers (evidently the nations) could come and "make peace" with him (27:5). In any case, the vineyard of "Jacob" is going to be so fruitful that it will fill "the world with fruit" (27:6).

What accounts for this radical shift? Surely God was angry with his people, angry enough to destroy them. Yet here he talks as if those words had never been said. Verses 6–11 explain the matter. God did not bring destruction on Israel for the purpose of annihilating his people, his vineyard. If they want to see that kind of destruction, let them look at those whom God used as tools to strike the punishing blows (27:7).

Yes, God had indeed driven Israel out, like a tumbleweed before a driving windstorm (27:8). But his purpose was not annihilation but cleansing. That point comes clear in 27:9, where God says that the fruit of the "removal of his sin" will be the destruction of idol worship. The Hebrew of the verse is obscure, so that we do not know the means by which "Jacob's guilt [will] be atoned for," but the result is clear. Out of the fires of the Exile, the idolatry that was the obvious sign of disloyalty to the covenant Lord will be done away with.²

There is a clear causal connection between 27:9 and 10 in the Hebrew. Verse 10 begins with *ki* ("because"). This shows we must at least read verse 9, if not verses 7–9, with verses 10–11. But what that connection portends is not entirely clear because the identity of "the fortified city" is not spelled out. Elsewhere in this section this city seems to represent the oppressors of God's people (25:2). If that is the case, it seems to me the most natural reading is that when the "fortified city," a "people without understanding," is destroyed, Israel will be set free by God's grace and will respond with renewed obedience to the covenant.

The other alternative is that there has been a shift of metaphor and that "the fortified city" is now a reference to Jerusalem, which it would be natural to assume in the immediate context.⁴ The phrase "without understanding" also sounds much like what is said of Israel in 1:3. In this case, the passage is restating the point in 27:8 as to why the destruction was needed. On balance, and without a sign that the metaphor has been shifted, I tend to side with the former of the two understandings.⁵

Isaiah 27:12–13 cap the Lord's promises to his people. The writer begins with the metaphor of harvest. The Lord will not allow one kernel of grain or one olive to be lost but will diligently gather them all from the distant borders of the land—the "Euphrates" in the north and the "Wadi of Egypt" in the south. The same point is made with a different metaphor, the trumpet call of muster for battle, in verse 13. The "exiles" from north and south are called to "worship the LORD on the holy mountain," where the last great feast is to be held (25:6–8).

Bridging Contexts

If FEW OF US have vineyards today, many of us are familiar with *This Old House*. We might think of what God is saying here along those lines. God just wishes that some termites would show up in the old house. How he would delight in rooting them out and repairing the damage they have done. The new work would be better than the original. Or what about tearing out some old plumbing and wiring? God would love to lavish attention on the old place. In the end you would hardly recognize it from what he started with. Why would he do it? To sell it and make a lot of money? Never! He would pour so much of himself into the work because that is where he wants to live.

We continually have to remind ourselves that idolatry is not first of all the making of figures of gods and goddesses. It is an attitude, the attitude that I must find a way to manipulate the forces in control of the universe to satisfy my needs. The statues, then, are simply a way to visualize those forces and make them amenable to my control.

But the statues are only symptoms. It is possible to have the attitude of an idolater and never think of making an idol. Whenever I try to satisfy my needs for myself by manipulating the elements of the creation, I am

succumbing to idolatry. God calls us to surrender our needs to him and to trust him to meet those needs in his ways. Usually he will meet them through our talents and abilities, but it is the attitude with which we do it that makes all the difference.

Contemporary Significance

God's actions in our lives today continue to be not for the purpose of destruction but for refinement. If trouble and adversity have come our way, our attitude about God will make all the difference in how we receive them. If we think of God as passionately loving "the old house" that we are, then the ripping of the saw and the crashing of the hammer will still be painful but much easier to bear. But if we think of him as the implacable judge determined to wring the last ounce of retribution out of us, the blows will be heavy indeed.

It is also important to keep the lesson of Job in mind. Adversity and trouble do not have easy explanations, and sometimes to give easy explanations in a glib manner can do more damage than the trouble itself. Job's "comforters" would have done much better to remain silent than to give faulty explanations concerning what they knew nothing about.

What we should do is to use difficulty as an opportunity. Is there something that has come between me and God? Has my loyalty to my covenant Lord become diluted? Has my surrender to him and my trust become less than total? If the answer to any of these is "yes," then there is only one option: godly sorrow, repentance, and flinging oneself on his divine grace. This was Paul's goal in calling for the expulsion of an immoral man from the church in Corinth. It was not punishment but the hope that hardship would bring about restoration (1 Cor. 5:5).

If there is no conviction from the Holy Spirit that a certain suffering is deserved, then the admonition of Peter is appropriate:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. (1 Peter 4:12–13)

This is not easy for us who are tempted to avoid pain at all costs. But we must realize that God does not have destruction in mind when he allows suffering to come across our path. If it is not for discipline, it may well be for a testimony of his grace in the conflict with evil. At any rate, we can know that just as Christ's sufferings led to his glory, so may ours (1 Peter 5:10), for God's final purpose is to lead us beyond judgment to the final ingathering.

Isaiah 28:1–29

WOE TO THAT wreath, the pride of Ephraim's drunkards, to the fading flower, his glorious beauty, set on the head of a fertile valley to that city, the pride of those laid low by wine! ²See, the Lord has one who is powerful and strong. Like a hailstorm and a destructive wind. like a driving rain and a flooding downpour, he will throw it forcefully to the ground. ³That wreath, the pride of Ephraim's drunkards. will be trampled underfoot. ⁴That fading flower, his glorious beauty, set on the head of a fertile valley, will be like a fig ripe before harvest as soon as someone sees it and takes it in his hand. he swallows it.

⁵In that day the LORD Almighty will be a glorious crown, a beautiful wreath for the remnant of his people. ⁶He will be a spirit of justice to him who sits in judgment, a source of strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate.

⁷And these also stagger from wine and reel from beer:
Priests and prophets stagger from beer and are befuddled with wine;
they reel from beer,
they stagger when seeing visions,
they stumble when rendering decisions.

⁸All the tables are covered with vomit and there is not a spot without filth.

9"Who is it he is trying to teach?
To whom is he explaining his message?
To children weaned from their milk, to those just taken from the breast?
10 For it is:
Do and do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule; a little here, a little there."

11 Very well then, with foreign lips and strange tongues
God will speak to this people,
12 to whom he said,
"This is the resting place, let the weary rest";
and, "This is the place of repose"—
but they would not listen.
13 So then, the word of the LORD to them will become:
Do and do, do and do,
rule on rule, rule on rule;
a little here, a little there—
so that they will go and fall backward,

be injured and snared and captured.

¹⁴Therefore hear the word of the LORD, you scoffers

who rule this people in Jerusalem.

15 You boast, "We have entered into a covenant with death, with the grave we have made an agreement.

When an overwhelming scourge sweeps by, it cannot touch us,

for we have made a lie our refuge and falsehood our hiding place."

¹⁶So this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

"See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone,

a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation;

the one who trusts will never be dismayed.

¹⁷I will make justice the measuring line and righteousness the plumb line;

hail will sweep away your refuge, the lie, and water will overflow your hiding place.

¹⁸Your covenant with death will be annulled;

your agreement with the grave will not stand.

When the overwhelming scourge sweeps by,

you will be beaten down by it.

¹⁹As often as it comes it will carry you away;

morning after morning, by day and by night,

it will sweep through."

The understanding of this message will bring sheer terror.

²⁰The bed is too short to stretch out on, the blanket too narrow to wrap around you.

21The LORD will rise up as he did at Mount Perazim, he will rouse himself as in the Valley of Gibeon—

to do his work, his strange work, and perform his task, his alien task.

Now stop your mocking, or your chains will become heavier; the Lord, the LORD Almighty, has told me of the destruction decreed against the whole land.

²³Listen and hear my voice; pay attention and hear what I say.

When a farmer plows for planting, does he plow continually?
Does he keep on breaking up and harrowing the soil?

²⁵When he has leveled the surface, does he not sow caraway and scatter cummin?

Does he not plant wheat in its place, barley in its plot, and spelt in its field?

²⁶His God instructs him and teaches him the right way.

²⁷Caraway is not threshed with a sledge, nor is a cartwheel rolled over cummin; caraway is beaten out with a rod, and cummin with a stick.
²⁸Grain must be ground to make bread;

so one does not go on threshing it forever.

Though he drives the wheels of his threshing cart over it, his horses do not grind it.

²⁹All this also comes from the LORD Almighty, wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom.

Original Meaning

IN CHAPTERS 28–33 the prophet continues the lessons in trust that have characterized the material from chapter 13 onward. Having established God's sovereignty over the nations both in particular (chs. 13–23) and in general (chs. 24–27), Isaiah now returns to particular situations in Israel and Judah that illustrate the folly of trusting the nations instead of the King who had been revealing himself through the prophet.

Because refusal to trust in God will only lead to destruction, Isaiah begins several of the sections with the funeral word "woe" (28:1; 29:1, 15; 30:1; 31:1; 33:1). It is possible to consider the material in groups of two chapters each. Chapters 28–29 deal with a problem that is exacerbated by the foolish, drunken leaders; chapters 30–31 critique the proposed solution: dependence on Egypt; and chapters 32–33 present the true solution: reliance on the true Leader, the righteous King.

Most of these chapters are focused on Judah, as might be expected since that is Isaiah's home. However, chapter 28 begins with a woe addressed to "Ephraim," that is, northern Israel. It is unclear just how far this address continues. Clearly, by 28:14 the focus has shifted to Jerusalem, and the prophet does not specifically return to Israel after that. However, most of what is said after 28:14 is still relevant to the northern kingdom since it has entered its final death throes.

This material seems to relate to events somewhat later than those recorded in chapters 7–8. They also apparently precede the events of chapters 36–37. Thus, they fall roughly between 730 and 705 B.C. When it became clear that the northern kingdom was going to fall to Assyria and

that Ahaz's "alliance" with Assyria was as worthless as Isaiah had predicted, the only human hope left was Egypt. No other country in the area had the wealth or resources to mount an army of sufficient size to stand up to the Assyrians. But to Isaiah, trusting Egypt is as foolish as trusting Assyria. Although it is unlikely that Egypt will turn on Judah as Assyria had, they are still only flesh and blood (31:3) and can offer nothing like the help that the King can.

Chapter 28 has four subunits: verses 1–6, 7–13, 14–22, and 23–29. There is a question whether verses 7–13 relate more closely to verses 1–6, as I tend to read it, or to verses 14–22, as Motyer does. It is a question of whether the pronouncement against Ephraim is continuing in these verses or whether it has already shifted to Judah and Jerusalem.

Pronouncement Against Ephraim (28:1–6)

THROUGHOUT THIS STANZA, there is a play on "wreath." This is the circlet of flowers or vines worn on the head of champions or revelers. The same practice existed in the Greek and Roman cultures. The drunken partygoers in Samaria wear these wreaths on their heads as they try to forget the terror facing them. At the same time the battlements of the city sitting on its hilltop at the "head" of the "valley" (28:1, 4) give it the appearance of one of these wreaths. But Isaiah sees a day when all these wreaths, both the real and the symbolic, will be thrown to the ground and trampled. The "pride" of the northern kingdom is going to be snatched up like a ripe "fig" (28:4).

In contrast, there is another "wreath," the Lord himself (28:5). He will be the source of beauty and glory for those who have abandoned their own pride in glad submission to him. He will give "justice" to the judges and "strength" to the soldiers (28:6). The mention of "crown" in verse 5 puts the issue in a clear light: Who is the King, the drunken political leaders or "the LORD Almighty?"

Continuing Pronouncement Against Ephraim (28:7–13)

THE OCCURRENCE OF "also" in Isa. 28:7 makes me believe that these verses continue to be addressed to the northern kingdom. Verses 1–4 spoke of the political leaders and the nobility, whereas verses 7–8 show that the priests and prophets are no better off. They too are besotted with the attempt to please and satisfy themselves. Undoubtedly, alcohol abuse is a problem for

them, but it is only a symptom of their deeper problem, an unwillingness to surrender their needs and desires to the Lord (cf. also Mal. 2:1–9).

The result is that those who should be giving clear guidance and teaching in that desperate hour are "befuddled" and staggering around in a stupor. The "tables" (Isa. 28:8) may be tables at which the priests sit to give judgment, or they may be the mats around which the partygoers sit. In any case, Isaiah says they "are covered with vomit," expressing the depths of his disgust with what is taking place.

Verses 9–10 express the mockery of these religious leaders for the true prophet. "Who does he think he is," they say, "treating us like little children?" Of course, childishness is just what alcohol does to a person, but it makes them unable to recognize the fact. They denounce the repetitive simplicity of the prophet's teaching, clearly wanting something more nuanced and ambiguous as befits their supposedly sophisticated understanding.²

The prophet responds in 28:11–13 by saying that since this is what they think they are getting, it is exactly what they will get, only from other lips than his. Since they refuse God's invitation to rest in him by abandoning their petty pride and demeaning pleasures, they will learn his truth through "foreign lips and strange tongues." In other words, the Assyrians will teach them that what the prophet said is true. Then the demands of the conquerors will really be repetitively simple. If the people will not learn the easy way of faith, then they must learn the hard way of experience: "They will go and fall backward" (28:13).

A Message to the Leaders in Jerusalem (28:14–22)

THE FOCUS NOW shifts to the leaders in Jerusalem. With the opening "therefore" the prophet calls them to pay attention to what has been said to the northern leaders and perhaps learn something from his message to them. Judgment is imminent in the north, and it is not at all clear that they will escape it in the south. If they continue in their present ways, they will not escape. It is unclear whether 28:15 represents an actual quote from the Judean leaders or a sarcastic restatement of their words by the prophet. I tend to think the latter because it is hard for me to imagine that people would actually say they have made a lie their refuge.

"Scoffers" (28:14) is perhaps the most serious Old Testament epithet Isaiah could apply to these leaders. A "scoffer" is someone who not only rejects the truth but also makes light of it. Like the leaders in the north, these Judean scoffers have laughed at the foolishness of trusting God and have made their cynical covenants "with death." Probably this is a reference to an alliance with Egypt. They believe that it will guarantee life for them and their nation when Assyria, "the overwhelming scourge," comes. In fact, Isaiah says, their covenant is going to bring the very opposite—death. They have allied themselves with a "lie," the idea that human power is a better means of protecting oneself than God's power.

God's response to the "covenant of death" appears in 28:16–19b. He begins by asserting once again that he alone is trustworthy. The "tested stone" (v. 16) is the opposite of the "lie" on which the leaders have built their "refuge" (v. 17). Its measurements are the "justice" and "righteousness" of God, and it can stand whatever shocks might come to it. Anyone who builds on it "will never be dismayed"; that is, they can be calm and deliberate, experiencing the "repose" promised in verse 12. The "stone" is probably to be understood as an agglomeration of all the elements of God's trustworthiness. When any other trust is measured against him, its faultiness becomes apparent at once, as is the case with the "covenant with death" (v. 18).

In 28:17c–19b God declares that the "hiding place" the leaders have so craftily built is going to be swept away like a hut in a windstorm. Far from being safe from the "overwhelming scourge" (v. 15), they are going to be totally swept away by it (v. 18). The foolish attempt of these Jerusalem leaders to protect themselves from it will actually make it the more dangerous to them. Moreover, the flood will not come just once but again and again ("morning by morning"). This is an accurate reflection of the Assyrian tactics, as they came back to an area again and again until it was completely destroyed.

Isaiah 28:19c–22 give us the prophet's reflection on the Lord's words. Anyone who truly understands this message should be terrorized by it, for there will be no place to hide. Verse 20 is perhaps a popular proverb expressing this idea. The Egyptian alliance will not be big enough to do them any good when God sets to work. And that is just the point, for it is not Assyria that is the "overwhelming scourge" (28:15, 18); rather, it is the

Lord. He is the One with whom the scoffers have to do, and he is a far more serious enemy than even Assyria.

Just as the Lord struck down the Philistines with a flood at "Mount Perazim" (28:21; cf. 2 Sam. 5:20) and scattered the Canaanites with hail in the "Valley of Gibeon" (Isa. 28:21; cf. Josh. 10:11), so now he will treat his own people like those enemies (cf. Isa. 1:24). Because of that, it will be "a strange work" (28:21). But it will be a necessary one if there is to be any hope of redemption for the people. Thus, the scoffers had better "stop [their] mocking" (28:22) of the word of God and had better start listening to what "the Lord, the LORD Almighty" (lit., "the Lord, Yahweh of heaven's armies") is actually saying.

Illustration from the World of Agriculture (28:23–29)

ONCE AGAIN, ISAIAH closes his message with a graphic illustration. He has been talking about the word of God, to which the scoffers and drunkards refuse to listen. He has been saying that there is a set of simple cause-and-effect principles that rule the spiritual world, which if they are flouted will result in disaster. In these verses the prophet seeks to illustrate his point from the world of agriculture.

The least-educated farmer knows that there are some things you do and some things you don't. "Listen and hear my voice" (28:23) has overtones of wisdom literature, with which the royal counselors would be familiar. Also, the comparison of one activity, royal counsel, with another, farming, is characteristic of wisdom literature. A farmer knows that there are certain appropriate ways to do things. He does not keep on plowing forever, as though that were an end in itself. When he plants, he does not mix up all the different seeds together. Each has to be grown separately. When he threshes, he uses appropriate tools to the size of the grain involved. To use a heavy threshing sledge or a stone roller on the tiny "caraway" and "cummin" seeds would crush them to dust. Instead, he uses a jointed "stick" called a "flail" in English. Neither does one use a threshing sledge to grind up the grain for flour. There are other tools for that.

In each of these cases, Isaiah says these peasants have learned these principles from God, the Creator. His natural revelation has taught them how life works. Why cannot these wise counselors, who have the benefit of both natural and special revelation, be as intelligent as an uneducated

peasant when it comes to understanding that God can be trusted and humans cannot?

Bridging Contexts

SAMARIA THE WREATH. As mentioned above, Samaria sat on a hilltop at the head of a fairly broad valley that sloped gently up from the Mediterranean coastal plain. With its crenelated walls ringing the hilltop, it looked like the wreath worn by victors or revelers. When Omri, king of Israel, moved his capital there from Tirzah, a much more secluded interior site, he was expressing in a physical way that the northern kingdom had "come of age." They no longer needed to be worried about their security, and they were no longer to be an isolated, parochial state. They would take their place in world affairs, because just at the foot of Samaria's valley, about ten miles away from the city, ran the great international highway connecting Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Under Omri's son Ahab, the city's glory grew. Amos mentions (Amos 6:4) the people of Samaria stretching themselves out on couches inlaid with ivory, and archaeological discoveries from the time of Ahab have shown fine inlaid ivory work in the city. The wealth and beauty of Samaria were clearly a source of pride for the people of the northern kingdom. But Isaiah says that that beautiful "wreath" will be thrown down to the ground, as indeed it was by the Assyrian kings Shalmanezer and Sargon in 722/721 B.C. Although Herod the Great rebuilt it, naming the new city Sebaste, it never regained the glory of the Israelite period; it is abandoned today.

Ephraim. The two dominant tribes in the northern kingdom were Ephraim and Manasseh. Although Manasseh was initially given a much larger share of land than Ephraim, Ephraim's was almost entirely in the hill country and was more easily conquered from the Canaanites than Manasseh's. This may explain why Ephraim was generally the more influential of the two and why it is frequently used in the Bible as a synonym for the entire northern kingdom. Its territory extended from about six miles north of Jerusalem to the foot of Mount Gerizim, about eighteen miles, and from the top of the Jordan Valley on the East to the coastal plain on the west, about twenty-five miles. Even though Samaria was actually

located in the territory of Manasseh, it is referred to as the capital of Ephraim in Isaiah 7:9 (see also 9:9; Hos. 7:1; Obad. 19).

Foreign lips. Although almost all the languages spoken in the ancient Near East were in the Semitic family (with the exceptions of Egyptian and Hittite), they were enough different from each other that they were unintelligible to native speakers of one language who had not made a specific study of the other language. This would be analogous to French, Spanish, and Italian today (all rooted in Latin). The result is that even though the Assyrian language shares much of the same phonetic structure as Hebrew and even some of the same vocabulary, it would still sound like gibberish to the average Israelite.

To bridge the language problem in its empire, Assyria promoted the use of Aramaic, the language of Syria, as a common language. This may have been both for geographic and linguistic reasons. Geographically, Syria lay close to the midpoint of the empire, and linguistically Aramaic lies somewhat between two of the main branches of the Semitic system, Eastern and Northwestern.

Farming. In the narrow valleys of the Judean and Ephraimite hill country, farming was generally a subsistence affair. People lived in villages and then walked out to their plots of ground. The plow was usually a metal-pointed stick, pulled by oxen if one was rich or by another human if one was poor. This broke up the earth to a depth of three or four inches. Then the clods were broken up with a harrow, a framework of logs with metal spikes driven down through them, again pulled by animals or humans. The fields were divided into smaller plots, sometimes separated from each other by hedges of thorns or just by pathways.

The chief grain crops were wheat and barley, with the finer condiment grains of caraway and cummin grown in smaller, separate areas. At harvest time the grains were cut with wooden sickles having metal or stone teeth set in them. The grain was then piled in heaps in a flat open area, where heavy threshing sledges or stone rollers could be pulled around and around on top of the heap until the kernels of grain had been separated from the straw and chaff. Then on a windy day, the whole mass was tossed in the air with baskets or with basket-shaped winnowing forks. The chaff would be blown away and the heavier grain would fall back to the ground to be gathered up

and stored. The finer seeds would be separated from the straw and chaff with a jointed stick before being winnowed.

Contemporary Significance

ALCOHOL. This chapter highlights the problem of alcohol. After the failed experiment of Prohibition, to which the American church gave so much of its energies, the church has become almost silent on the subject of alcohol. Part of this may be due to the increasing sophistication of young evangelicals, the impression successfully promoted by the media and the alcohol industry that drinking is sophisticated, and the notion that binge drinking is fun and funny. Today in America, despite all the attention given to drug abuse, addiction to alcohol is an even more serious problem. While it may be true that alcoholism has a genetic basis, it is also true that one can never become an alcoholic if one never begins drinking alcohol in the first place.

In the ancient Near East, with the problem of water contamination and the difficulty of procuring water in many places, wine and beer were often necessities, both for water purification and as a water substitute. Today, that is not an issue. We have clean water available in abundance, and there is no good reason to drink alcohol. Instead, it is seen today as a recreational drink. But it is recreation that comes at a terrible price. Despite the imposition of "zero tolerance" for drunk-driving offenses and the worthwhile efforts of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, deaths from driving while under the influence continue to mount. One state policeman told me that if drunk driving were eliminated, more than 50 percent of highway fatalities would be prevented.

We in the church need to renew our stand against the drinking of alcohol. Total abstinence is now regarded as some sort of fringe radicalism. We need to assert again that abstinence is a wise and reasonable course, one that will lead to health and well-being. Of course, it is possible to use alcohol in moderate ways, but why should it be necessary for the Christian? Some assert that it is a way of showing Christian freedom. But why should freedom be shown in a potentially destructive way? Why not show our freedom by demonstrating that artificial stimulation is not necessary, that it is possible to relax and have a good time without taking a substance into

our bodies that lowers God-given inhibitions and provides unnecessary calories? At the least, we must reopen the discussion in the church and face the crisis in a biblical way. We must also do everything we can to help raise the awareness of this threat for our young people before an increasingly hedonistic culture carries them off.

The simplicity of the gospel. One of the charges that the drunken leaders of Israel and Judah lodged against Isaiah was that he was treating them like children. He was saying such simple things to them. We get a sense of that in the story of Naaman, the Syrian general, and Elisha (2 Kings 5:1–14). Naaman wanted some mysterious rituals performed on him for healing; he did not want to do something as simple as dipping himself in the Jordan.

This was also the case with the early preachers of the gospel of Christ. When we look at the sermons the apostles preached in the book of Acts, we see models of simplicity and clarity (cf. Acts 2:14–36; 17:22–31). Certainly the messages have been abridged and condensed, but still there is little that smacks of erudition and intellectual complexity. The reason for this is obvious. While Christian theology has provided more than its share of intellectual complexity, the central core of its truth is simple. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the so-called "plan of salvation." In five simple statements taken from Scripture, the essentials can all be laid out:

- 1. All humans are estranged from God by their sin. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).
- 2. The result of sin is eternal death, but that is not God's desire. "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23).
- 3. We may receive God's gift of eternal life by faith. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8–9).
- 4. We exercise faith by repenting from our sins and accepting what Christ has done for us. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9); "if you confess with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised

- him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved" (Rom. 10:9–10).
- 5. We are enabled to live a new life of victory over sin. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17); "for we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin" (Rom. 6:6).

All of this is "a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor. 1:23). That is, to those who insist on justifying themselves before God by their own spiritual achievements, this simple message is offensive because it says they are sinful and cannot solve the problem for themselves. Undoubtedly, this was the same reaction the leaders of Israel and Judah had to Isaiah: "How dare you say we are sinful by indulging ourselves a little (hic) and by trying to work out sensible arrangements with our neighbors instead of doing a perfectly foolish thing like trusting in God. Who do you think we are, children?"

The message of the gospel was "foolishness" to the educated Gentiles, who were also trying to save themselves by their own efforts—in the case of the Corinthians, by intellectual prowess. They had imagined an evil world that was the result of a succession of creators, each a bit more corrupt than the last. Thus, to get to the "Good," the real originator of the world, it was necessary to work one's way up through the angelic "creators" with a whole host of passwords and special rubrics. This deliciously complex intellectual structure gave endless fascination. It also was a way of separating the true elite from the raw crowd. Only the select few could master this system and demonstrate a true mastery of the spirit over the evil body.7 What foolishness the gospel of Christ seemed to the Greek intellectuals. How hard it was to accept that all the arduous study of arcane knowledge did not put them ahead of the ditch-digger, who knew nothing but the cross of Christ. Furthermore, to believe that one could somehow be identified with Christ in his death and that that was more important than intellectual attainment was plain foolishness!

This idea—salvation by one's own effort, either in spiritual activity or in intellectual accomplishments—is a continual alternative to the simplicity of the Christian message. We must constantly be on guard against it. We must reiterate the message and make plain just how it flies in the face of the world's wisdom. This is what Paul says he decided to do when he arrived in Corinth:

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. For I was resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. (1 Cor. 1:20–21; 2:2)

If this brings the scorn of the world on us, so be it. But the simplicity of the Cross is also the power of the Cross. Just as Isaiah's simple message was the one that has endured across the centuries, so it is the message of the Cross that will endure, when all the sophisticated (and often debauched) alternatives to it have expired. Isaiah expresses this enduring quality with his language of the "tested stone," the "cornerstone." A building can only stand straight and true if it is on a proper foundation. The New Testament writers understood Isaiah as referring here to the Incarnation (Rom. 9:33; 10:11; 1 Peter 2:6). In Jesus Christ, God has forever demonstrated his love, his trustworthiness, his saving righteousness, and his justice.

The nature of God's requirements. When Isaiah appealed to the practices of the farmer, he was making a profound point, namely, that the Creator has made the world according to certain principles that can be discovered without a great deal of effort. The uneducated peasant has been taught these principles by God. We may argue that God had nothing to do with such principles; they are simply common sense. But Isaiah would answer, "Where do you think common sense came from? Did you create it?" Naturally, the answer to that question is no. In other words, as we live in the world and observe its causes and effects, we learn that certain things are so. We may not know why they are so, but we can see that they are. If

you thresh caraway with a stone roller, you will crush the tiny seeds. Why is it that way? Well, it just is.

This point is just as distasteful today as it was in Isaiah's day. There are spiritual principles that are as simple and ironclad as physical ones. The pagans of Isaiah's day had observed these and had written them into their civil law codes. They knew that no human society could survive where lying, stealing, murder, and adultery occurred with any regularity. The pagan cultures, with no real concept of transcendence and thus no true doctrine of creation, could not explain it, but they recognized it to be so. Thus, such behaviors were forbidden in all the legal codes of the ancient Near East. It waited until biblical revelation for the explanation to be made clear.

The Creator is a God of truth, integrity, love, and faithfulness, and thus his creation reflects that character. The Sinai covenant shows that living according to the standards of truth, integrity, love, and faithfulness is not simply a utilitarian choice but is an act of glad submission to the Creator. This is why Moses could say:

And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good? (Deut. 10:12–13)

In other words, obedience to the covenant did not require some strange, occult activities outside of human experience. It involved nothing other than living out the lifestyle that others had discovered before them, but doing it for the sake of the love of God.

Modern legal theory is deeply opposed to the idea of "natural law." We are passionately committed to the idea that we can make up laws of human and social behavior as we go and that these laws are nothing but our own creations. To admit that we cannot do so is to admit that we are not ultimate in the world, and that we will not permit. Isaiah would merely shake his head and point to the farmer. Are there "natural laws" in nature? he would

ask. If so, why would we think there are none in the rest of the natural world, that is, the world of the spirit?

Isaiah 29:1-14

WOE TO YOU, Ariel, Ariel, the city where David settled! Add year to year and let your cycle of festivals go on. ²Yet I will besiege Ariel; she will mourn and lament. she will be to me like an altar hearth. ³I will encamp against you all around; I will encircle you with towers and set up my siege works against you. ⁴Brought low, you will speak from the ground; your speech will mumble out of the dust. Your voice will come ghostlike from the earth: out of the dust your speech will whisper.

5But your many enemies will become like fine dust, the ruthless hordes like blown chaff. Suddenly, in an instant, 6the LORD Almighty will come with thunder and earthquake and great noise, with windstorm and tempest and flames of a devouring fire.

7Then the hordes of all the nations that fight against Ariel, that attack her and her fortress and besiege her, will be as it is with a dream, with a vision in the night—

8as when a hungry man dreams that he is eating,
but he awakens, and his hunger remains;
as when a thirsty man dreams that he is drinking,
but he awakens faint, with his thirst unquenched.
So will it be with the hordes of all the nations that fight against Mount Zion.

⁹Be stunned and amazed,
blind yourselves and be sightless;
be drunk, but not from wine,
stagger, but not from beer.
¹⁰The LORD has brought over you a deep
sleep:
He has sealed your eyes (the
prophets);
he has covered your heads (the seers).

¹¹For you this whole vision is nothing but words sealed in a scroll. And if you give the scroll to someone who can read, and say to him, "Read this, please," he will answer, "I can't; it is sealed." ¹²Or if you give the scroll to someone who cannot read, and say, "Read this, please," he will answer, "I don't know how to read."

¹³The Lord says:

"These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me

is made up only of rules taught by men.

14Therefore once more I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder; the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish."

Original Meaning

THIS SECOND "WOE" is addressed to Jerusalem, as is apparent from its being called "the city where David settled" (Isa. 29:1). However, it is also called "Ariel," and the explanation of this word is not given. One possible meaning of the word is "altar hearth," which is the most probable explanation (so NIV, 29:2; see Ezek. 43:15). This would fit in with the general emphasis of the passage on the cultic activity that took place at Jerusalem (Isa. 29:1, 13).

A second matter of scholarly debate is the presence of a sizeable section of promise (29:5–8) in what seems on the surface to be a judgment oracle. Many scholars believe these verses to be a later insertion. However, this presupposes that the original book was only words of judgment. Yet one of the central themes of Isaiah as it now exists (see the introduction) is the interplay of hope and judgment. To suggest that this entire interplay is secondary, imposed on whatever the original book may have been, is asserting too much. Here, as we have seen so many times before in the book, we have the movement from judgment (29:1–4) to hope (29:5–8) and back to judgment again (29:9–14). Judgment is not final, hope is. But the reality of the coming hope must not divert the hearers from the reality that apart from genuine repentance, judgment is the inescapable route to hope.

As in Isaiah 1, Jerusalem's problem is that they believe they have immunity from judgment because they have the true cult of Yahweh (29:1, 13). But as there, Isaiah says this worship is worthless because it is not from the heart (29:13). He even goes so far as to say that what they are doing is not revealed but is made up by men. That must have been shocking in view of the prescriptions for worship in the Torah. Probably his point is that since

their "hearts" are not devoted to God, all they are really responding to is human demands; they are not really worshiping. Therefore, Jerusalem is no more immune from destruction than Samaria. The fact that they are not officially worshiping idols hardly enters into the equation. They too are trying to manipulate God with cultic activity, not worshiping as an expression of covenant love.

Verse 2 suggests that all of Jerusalem will become an altar hearth on which the people themselves will become the sacrifice. Like the Canaanites, whose persistent sinning meant that in the end they were "devoted" (Josh. 6:17) to the Lord as an offering by the Israelites, the Israelites themselves will be on the altar. We must either accept God's substitute with genuine repentance and faith or become the sacrifice ourselves. Note that there is no mention of Assyria here; God is the enemy who besieges the city (Isa. 29:3).

Verse 4 is perhaps an allusion to the worship of the dead and to spiritism (see 8:19; also comments on 28:1–29). While priding themselves on their pure worship, the people of Jerusalem and Judah are secretly engaging in many pagan practices. Ezekiel's vision of what was taking place in the temple in his own day (Ezek. 8–9), some 125 years later than Isaiah, argues that similar practices were going on for some time. Like the mediums and spiritists, the captives of Judah will be mumbling and whispering as they lie in the "dust" beneath the tyrant's boot.

But because it is God, not Assyria, who puts his people into the dust, it is also God who can make Jerusalem's enemies as insubstantial as "fine dust" (Isa. 29:5). If Assyria had devastated God's land against his wishes, God would be unable to deliver his people. But as it is, he can deliver them whenever he chooses and can blow the mighty nations away like so much "chaff." In fact, before God that is all the great nations are. They appear so weighty and terrifying, but before God they are as thin and as vaporous as a "dream" (29:7; see also 40:15–17). The nations think that they can devour Jerusalem and wipe her off the face of the earth. But that is only a dream on their part (29:8). Little do they know that Jerusalem will be drawing pilgrims from all over the earth thousands of years after the capitals of those nations have ceased to exist.

But the tragic reality is that all of this is as unintelligible to the Judeans as it is to the Assyrians (and later to the Babylonians). They are all equally

"blind" (29:9) to the reality of the Lord's work. In verses 9–10 the interplay of causation is significant. The people have blinded themselves, yet at the same time God has made the prophets unable to see the truth. We may endlessly debate which of these comes first, but the fact is that nothing happens apart from both those causes. As a result, the word of God ("this whole vision") is a closed book to God's people (29:11–12). From God's side it is sealed up and cannot be opened; from the human side, it cannot be read when it is opened.

Consequently, Jerusalem's religion has become only a performance with themselves as the audience. There is no real connection between the worshipers and the One being worshiped. They go through the motions with no expectation of any real encounter with the living God. Their religion has lost all sense of wonder. So God says he *will* encounter them with wonders (29:14), but the clear implication is that it will be the wonder of the God they thought they had under their control suddenly bursting forth to become their enemy (cf. 28:21). All the "wisdom" of the counselors and leaders who urge reliance on Egypt will be proven false.

Bridging Contexts

VERSE 3 DESCRIBES siege warfare. In the days before the invention of gunpowder, there was no sure way to break into a walled city. In most cases, apart from treachery inside the city, there was no alternative to a long siege. The besieging army encircled the city with armed camps. Sometimes they actually built a wall around the city outside of its own walls, in order to be sure that no one could get out or in to bring supplies or arms of any sort into the city. Moreover, to try to shorten the time of the siege, attempts would be made to break into the city. Because the cities were usually built high atop natural hills or on mounds of debris from previous destructions, it was necessary to build ramps of earth up which battering rams ("siege machines") could be pushed to try to breach the walls.

Another device used was prefabricated "towers," which could be moved up the ramps quickly and erected against the walls. Attackers on these towers could prevent defenders from attacking those operating the battering rams, and they could also use the towers as a means to get over the walls and down into the city. To make the same point today, God might say that he will bring his helicopter gunships, his main battle tanks, and his ballistic missiles against us. It is a terrible thing to have the God you think is your "rabbit's foot" turn out to be the main armament arrayed against you.

Contemporary Significance

TRUE WORSHIP. Since Hebrew worship was similar in form to that of the pagans, it was easy for the Hebrews to fall into a pagan understanding, namely, that because certain human activities have been performed, the gods must do certain things. This rests on the worldview of continuity, which holds that the human, divine, and natural realms are continuous, so that what takes place in one realm is duplicated in the others. Thus, the attitude of the worshiper's heart has no real effect on the efficacy of the ritual performed. The key is to do the ritual correctly so that the maximum linkage with the divine world can be maintained. The result is that the activity has much more to do with manipulation than with worship. Because I have given God a very expensive gift, he is obligated to bless me; or because the lamb and I have become continuous through the ritual, God thinks I have died and will not punish me for my sins anymore.

Again and again the Old Testament speaks out against such an idea. God is transcendent; that is, he is radically discontinuous from this world. Thus, he cannot be manipulated through anything done in this world. He forgives through his grace alone because of the death of Christ, and the giving of a lamb is only a symbol of true repentance and faith. Apart from these, offering a lamb is worse than useless. Isaiah says such an offerer might as well break the neck of a dog and offer it to God (66:3). No place is this truth stated more plainly than in Psalm 51:16–17:

You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Although we today no longer offer blood sacrifices, we run the same danger as the people in Old Testament times. That is, because we have performed certain religious activities, we believe God must do our will. We have prayed long and fervently; therefore, God must heal our child. We have gone to church every Sunday for months; therefore, God must give us a good job. We have read the Bible and prayed every day for weeks; therefore, God must lift our depression. These are not acts of worship but attempts at manipulation. We do not want God in our lives; we want what he can do for us.

But worship is not utilitarian; rather, it is a free expression of praise and thanks. By graciously freeing us from the condemnation of our sin and making it possible to live a life of holiness, God has already done many times more than we can ever deserve. Of course, he wants to bless us even further, but all too often our attempts to use him, while still maintaining control of our lives, only serve to block the very blessing he wants to give.

Hearing the Word of God. Verses 10–12 speak of a situation where the Word of God is unintelligible to a person, defining a dual responsibility for that situation. On the one hand, God has blinded the eyes of the prophets—the scroll "is sealed." On the other hand, it is a human problem—"I don't know how to read."

The same situation applies today. First there is a spiritual problem. In Isaiah's time, the prophets did not want to hear God's Word. Instead, they wanted some encouraging omen to give to the king or in order to get paid a handsome fee. So God blinded their spiritual eyes and took his Word away from them. Similarly, if we try to read the Bible just for intellectual enrichment without first surrendering ourselves to its ultimate author to do what he says, we will find it a closed book. It will be as dry as dust and just as boring. Note Paul's words: "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Rom. 8:7). But if we have fallen in love with the Author and long to know him better, it is amazing how the Scriptures open up. The story of a new convert to Christ suddenly discovering how marvelous the Bible is can be multiplied thousands of times.

But there is also a human component in the reading process. Unless we have prepared ourselves to read, we may miss volumes of what God is trying to say to us. This story is also multiplied: After some months of reading the Bible, the new convert still finds great joy in it but begins to discover more and more that he or she does not understand. What is the

problem? It is that the Bible was not just dropped from heaven. Rather, God's Word has come to us through specific people who lived in specific times and places and used language in certain ways. Just as we need to learn about a new person we meet if we are really to understand what he or she is saying, so we need to prepare ourselves to understand the Bible. We need to learn about the backgrounds and settings of the biblical writers, and we need to learn how they used language.

If we learn a basic method of Bible study and purchase a small library of Bible reference tools (many now available in electronic form), we will have fulfilled our side of the equation. If the Holy Spirit unseals the book to our regenerated hearts and if we have trained ourselves to read it, it will be an unending source of life and truth. If not, it will be a sealed scroll that we cannot read, and destruction will come on us all the more unawares.

Isaiah 29:15-24

15WOE TO THOSE who go to great depths to hide their plans from the LORD, who do their work in darkness and think, "Who sees us? Who will know?"
16You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay!
Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, "He did not make me"?
Can the pot say of the potter,

¹⁷In a very short time, will not Lebanon be turned into a fertile field and the fertile field seem like a forest?

"He knows nothing"?

- ¹⁸In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll, and out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see.
- ¹⁹Once more the humble will rejoice in the LORD;
 - the needy will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.
- ²⁰The ruthless will vanish, the mockers will disappear, and all who have an eye for evil will be cut down—
- ²¹those who with a word make a man out to be guilty, who ensnare the defender in court and with false testimony deprive the innocent of justice.

²²Therefore this is what the LORD, who redeemed Abraham, says to the house of Jacob:

"No longer will Jacob be ashamed; no longer will their faces grow pale.

23When they see among them their children, the work of my hands, they will keep my name holy; they will acknowledge the holiness of the Holy One of Jacob, and will stand in awe of the God of Israel.

24Those who are wayward in spirit will gain understanding; those who complain will accept

instruction."

Original Meaning

THIS THIRD "WOE" is like the second (29:1–14) in that it is composed of both judgment (29:15–16) and hope (29:17–24). If we think about the situation, we can imagine why the promises of future redemption are necessary to the prophet's argument. He is calling on the Judeans to "wait" (see 30:15–18) for God's deliverance and not to rush off to Egypt for help, as the royal counselors are urging. Their counsel is foolish because it is unnecessary. God can be trusted to deliver his people. Indeed, the deliverance is assured, either on this side of judgment if there is genuine repentance and trust, or on the other side, if trust is refused. God is trustworthy.

The first and second woes were more general, aimed at the leadership at large. The fourth and fifth (31:1–9; 33:1–6) are more specific, focusing particularly on the counsel to trust Egypt. This third one is transitional, speaking not so much of the content of the counsel as its manner. The prophet accuses the counselors of trying to hide their counsel. In trying to hide their plans "from the LORD," they are probably trying to hide it from

his prophet. Undoubtedly, by this time Isaiah's (and the Lord's) position on placing trust in human nations is well known.

Nevertheless, the royal counselors, spiritually blind as they are, have made up their minds that an alliance with Egypt is what is needed. They have made their "plans" secretly, without consulting the Lord's prophet, foolishly hoping he will not find out. False hope! Isaiah says this is like the pot telling the potter how to do his work (29:16). They have things "upside down." It is the Maker who determines how a thing is made and not the other way around.

The promises made in 29:17–24 are more far-reaching than for mere physical restoration. They deal primarily with the spiritual needs of the nation. They promise a day when the kinds of attitudes and behaviors that have brought the nation to this dark day will be radically changed. In this regard, they are like the promises associated with the coming of the Spirit in 32:15–17. As there, the nation is seen as a spiritual desert that is transformed into a lush, "fertile field" (29:17). The progression there from desert to field to forest suggests that "Lebanon" here refers to the barren tops of the Lebanon mountain range, where nothing could grow. In that coming day, the "blind" and "deaf" (cf. 6:9–10) will see and hear.

The reference to the "scroll" (29:18) connects the thought back to 29:11–12. No longer will the Word of God be closed to God's people. Verses 19–21 deal with the social results of this restored sensitivity to God's leading and will. Those who are usually oppressed (the "humble" and the "needy") will be rejoicing in "the Holy One of Israel" (the sovereign Redeemer) because all the oppressors (the "ruthless," the "mockers," and those looking for a chance to do "evil") will be "cut down." Verse 21 identifies the oppression as judicial oppression, where the machinery that should be used specifically to protect the helpless is turned around to crush them. That kind of reversal is especially despicable to God (cf. Prov. 28:21; Amos 5:10, 12).

Isaiah 29:22–24 gives the results of all of this, as signaled by the opening "therefore." Gracious redemption will result in holy living and a transformed attitude towards God's truth. Redemption is expressed in a figure that appears frequently in the last section of the book: many children (cf. 54:2–3; 66:7–11). God will not allow his promises to Abraham to fail. The nation will not be wiped out. Furthermore, a day will come when the nation can hold up its head in joy, as God delivers her. Gone will be the

shame of defeat. In response to that deliverance, there will be a new willingness to live God's life.

This is, of course, covenant language. Those who are in covenant with God are committed to replicating God's holy character, his "name" (29:23), in their own behavior. Their defeat and exile have profaned God's name (Ezek. 36:20), but God promises that he will make them able to demonstrate his holiness. The continuity of the promises from Abraham (Isa. 29:22) through Jacob (29:23) and on up to Isaiah's own day is emphasized by the variation in the typical title from "the Holy One of Israel" to the more personal "the Holy One of Jacob." No longer will the descendants of Jacob take "the Holy One" for granted, but they will tremble before him (NIV "stand in awe of"). The upshot of this will be a new sensitivity to the Word and will of God. Instead of the stubbornness, willfulness, and general hardheadedness that tend to characterize all humans, not just Israel, there will be a grasp of "understanding" and a genuine teachability.

Bridging Contexts

THE JEWS. The promise that "when they see their children," the people of Israel will "keep my name holy" (29:23) sounds strange to us in a day of population explosion and concern about overcrowding of the planet. But in biblical times, as up until the last century, child mortality was high. Only a small percentage of children lived past age ten. When such a high child mortality rate was coupled with famine and warfare, it was possible for a people to simply cease to exist. We can look at the Mayan civilization in this hemisphere or the Ankor Wat people in Myanmar as examples of this. God here promises that he will not let that happen to Israel. Their children will live and multiply. Those children will be sources of labor for the family and a guarantee of care for the parents in their old age. As a result, Israel will survive as a people.

We can look around us and see that promise fulfilled today. How is it that the Jewish people still exist after thousands of years of hatred and unjust treatment? There are no satisfactory human answers to that question. By all the evidence, they should have ceased to exist long ago. But God has promised, and his promises do not fail!

Israel's legal system. In the NIV, Isaiah 29:21 speaks of "the defender in court." The Hebrew is "the one who seeks justice in the gate." So far as we know, there was no organized legal system in Israel such as we know today. "Judges" were more those who demonstrated and enforced God's rule in the world than those who interpreted and enforced a written code of laws. That task seems to have fallen to the priests (cf. Num. 5:30; Jer. 18:18; Mal. 2:7). In matters of civil law, it was the "elders," many of whom may have been old men retired from active life, who seem to have been given the responsibility to see that justice was done (cf. Ruth 4:1–12). These old men could most easily be found sitting in the main city gate.

These "gates" were actually multichambered gatehouses. In and around these gatehouses much of the activity of the city took place. The old men could sit in the shade inside the gatehouse and observe with interest the bustle around them. A person seeking redress for some injustice could come here seeking support for his case from the elders. Although there is no evidence that the decision of the elders was legally enforceable, it is clear their opinion carried great social weight. Someone who flaunted them could find himself unable to do any more business in the town. Sadly, this verse and others like it suggest that then, as now, the system could be "bought" and that the elders' opinions were not always impartial. To the God whose judgments are impartial, that situation is intolerable.

Contemporary Significance

FROM THE BEGINNING of time we as human beings have been trying to hide our real intents and feelings from God. We remember Adam and Eve hiding in their sin in the garden, as though God would not know where they were (Gen. 3:8). We remember Jacob hiding under a cloud of arrogance and self-sufficiency when God found him asleep in the desert (Gen. 28:16–17). We remember the disciples hiding their fear and uncertainty with a step back into the old life on a fishing expedition on the sea of Galilee (John 21:2–3).

Of course, God always finds us. He is our Maker, so he knows exactly how his pots are made (see Jer. 18:1–17; Rom. 9:20–21; 15:21). He finds the disobedient, he finds the proud, he finds the fearful. He does not exist for us, but we for him, so we cannot turn him off at will. How foolish, then, not to bring our plans to him for his approval and correction. Or better yet,

why not come to him to find out what his plans are for us? After all, he made us for a purpose, so perhaps it would be a good idea to try to find out that purpose.

Sometimes he gives us a long view, as he did with Isaiah and the Messiah. Sometimes he will unfold a life-calling in a moment. But equally often, it is simply the next step, which if we will follow leads to the next step and the next step until finally we come to some hilltop. We can then look back with wonder at the way he has led us. How sad when we stop our ears and say to our Maker, "You don't know what's best for me! I do, though, so I won't listen to you." How much better to say with Paul, "But my life is worth nothing unless I use it for doing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus" (Acts 20:24, NLT).

When God has found us, disciplined us, and, if we will let him, through repentance and faith restored us to himself, what does he want to happen in us? The text says of the restored Israelite people that they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob (NIV, "acknowledge the holiness of the Holy One of Jacob"). To "sanctify" is to make holy. But how is it possible to "sanctify" the only truly Holy One in the universe? What can we possibly do to make him any more holy?

Of course, the answer is that we cannot make him more holy. So what does the phrase mean? From a negative perspective, Moses' experience gives us the answer. The people had demanded water, and God had told Moses to speak to a nearby rock that would then pour out water. But Moses went out and said, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" and he struck the rock twice with his staff (Num. 20:10–11). Moses had made it appear that with his magic staff he could produce water on demand. God's response was that Moses did not "sanctify my name" (NIV "honor me as holy," 20:12). Moses had a golden opportunity to demonstrate that there is only one Holy Being in the universe: all-powerful, absolutely other, and completely loving. Instead, Moses took the opportunity to make himself look good.

So how do we sanctify the Lord? We do it by glad obedience. We demonstrate through holy lives just how holy God is. We do it by surrendering our glory to his. After all, we cannot save the world. If people look to us as though we were the Savior who can solve all their problems, they are going to be vastly disappointed. So God promises his people a day

when they would be able to gladly and completely obey his Word. It will not be any honor to them, but all honor goes to God. This is, of course, exactly what the covenant calls for: "Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy" (Lev. 19:1). God's people will demonstrate God's holy character by living out that holy character in their personal lives.

There was only one catch: They cannot seem to do it. To a large extent, the Old Testament is the story of Israel's failure to be a holy people. Here in Isaiah God promises that the day will come when they can actually fulfill the demands of the covenant. We now live in that day. The Holy Spirit is available to each of us to do what the old covenant could not do. It could tell the Israelites to live holy lives, but it could not enable them to do it. But now, as Paul tells us in Romans 8:3–4,

For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

In other words, through what Christ has done for us in forgiving the sin of the broken covenant and in giving us his Spirit, it is now possible for us to fulfill all the "righteous requirements of the law" in real life. It is possible for us to "sanctify the Holy One" by demonstrating his holiness in our lives, just as Isaiah promised.

Isaiah 30:1-33

¹"Woe to the obstinate children," declares the LORD, "to those who carry out plans that are not forming an alliance, but not by my Spirit, heaping sin upon sin; ²who go down to Egypt without consulting me; who look for help to Pharaoh's protection, to Egypt's shade for refuge. ³But Pharaoh's protection will be to your shame, Egypt's shade will bring you disgrace. ⁴Though they have officials in Zoan and their envoys have arrived in Hanes, ⁵everyone will be put to shame because of a people useless to them, who bring neither help nor advantage, but only shame and disgrace."

⁶An oracle concerning the animals of the Negev:

Through a land of hardship and distress, of lions and lionesses, of adders and darting snakes, the envoys carry their riches on donkeys' backs, their treasures on the humps of camels, to that unprofitable nation,

7to Egypt, whose help is utterly useless.

Therefore I call her Rahab the Do-Nothing.

⁸Go now, write it on a tablet for them, inscribe it on a scroll. that for the days to come it may be an everlasting witness. ⁹These are rebellious people, deceitful children, children unwilling to listen to the LORD's instruction. ¹⁰They say to the seers, "See no more visions!" and to the prophets, "Give us no more visions of what is right! Tell us pleasant things, prophesy illusions. ¹¹Leave this way, get off this path, and stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel!"

¹²Therefore, this is what the Holy One of Israel says:

"Because you have rejected this message, relied on oppression and depended on deceit,

13 this sin will become for you like a high wall, cracked and bulging, that collapses suddenly, in an instant.

14 It will break in pieces like pottery, shattered so mercilessly that among its pieces not a fragment will be found for taking coals from a hearth

or scooping water out of a cistern."

¹⁵This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says:

"In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it.

16 You said, 'No, we will flee on horses.'
Therefore you will flee!
You said, 'We will ride off on swift horses.'
Therefore your pursuers will be swift!

17 A thousand will flee at the threat of one; at the threat of five you will all flee away, till you are left like a flagstaff on a mountaintop, like a banner on a hill."

18 Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you;
he rises to show you compassion.
For the LORD is a God of justice.
Blessed are all who wait for him!

¹⁹O people of Zion, who live in Jerusalem, you will weep no more. How gracious he will be when you cry for help! As soon as he hears, he will answer you. ²⁰Although the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, your teachers will be hidden no more; with your own eyes you will see them. ²¹Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it." ²²Then you will defile your idols overlaid with silver and your images covered

with gold; you will throw them away like a menstrual cloth and say to them, "Away with you!"

²³He will also send you rain for the seed you sow in the ground, and the food that comes from the land will be rich and plentiful. In that day your cattle will graze in broad meadows. ²⁴The oxen and donkeys that work the soil will eat fodder and mash, spread out with fork and shovel. ²⁵In the day of great slaughter, when the towers fall, streams of water will flow on every high mountain and every lofty hill. ²⁶The moon will shine like the sun, and the sunlight will be seven times brighter, like the light of seven full days, when the LORD binds up the bruises of his people and heals the wounds he inflicted.

²⁷See, the Name of the LORD comes from with burning anger and dense clouds of smoke; his lips are full of wrath, and his tongue is a consuming fire. ²⁸His breath is like a rushing torrent, rising up to the neck. He shakes the nations in the sieve of destruction; he places in the jaws of the peoples a bit that leads them astray. ²⁹And you will sing as on the night you celebrate a holy festival; vour hearts will rejoice as when people go up with flutes to the mountain of the LORD, to the Rock of Israel. ³⁰The LORD will cause men to hear his majestic voice

and will make them see his arm coming down with raging anger and consuming fire, with cloudburst, thunderstorm and hail.

31The voice of the LORD will shatter Assyria; with his scepter he will strike them down.

32Every stroke the LORD lays on them with his punishing rod will be to the music of tambourines and harps, as he fights them in battle with the

as he fights them in battle with the blows of his arm.

33Topheth has long been prepared;
it has been made ready for the king.
Its fire pit has been made deep and wide,
with an abundance of fire and wood;
the breath of the LORD,
like a stream of burning sulfur,
sets it ablaze.

Original Meaning

THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS the fourth "woe" message between chapters 28 and 33. It is the first of two aimed specifically at the alliance with Egypt that the royal counselors are urging. Here Isaiah speaks more pointedly of the foolishness of such a course, for Egypt cannot offer any real help. She is a toothless dragon (30:1–7). Thus, because Judah has rejected the true help offered by God, they will be devastated, as though a high wall suddenly collapsed. They will be left like a tattered flag on a hilltop. God will have to wait until they come to their senses (30:8–18). When they do, he promises redemption and restoration for his people (30:19–26) and defeat for all their enemies (30:27–33).

Thus, once again we see a reiteration of the great themes of the first part of Isaiah's book. There is the poignant appeal to trust God, a promise of judgment on those who so stupidly rebel against God by trusting human nations instead of him, but then the assertion that after the judgment has come, there will yet be hope for those who turn to him.

Foolishness of Looking to Egypt (30:1–7)

THIS SECTION IS composed of two parts: The first (30:1–5) states the foolishness of trusting Egypt; the second (30:6–7) illustrates this message. Verse 1 is reminiscent of 1:2 as it speaks of "obstinate [or rebellious¹] children." God has carefully reared them, but they refuse to follow his ways (see Ezek. 16). They do not consult their Father for his counsel and advice but hastily make their own "plans" (Isa. 30:1) to serve what they think are their own best interests. Because they are "wayward in spirit" (29:24), they refuse to be led by God's Spirit (cf. 63:10–11). As a result, they do the very thing they are forbidden to do: go back to Egypt (cf. Deut. 17:16).

Admittedly, allying themselves with Egypt makes a good deal of sense from a human point of view. No other nation offers any hope of "protection" to Judah. On the surface, Egypt is large enough and powerful enough to be like a large palm tree, whose fronds offer "shade" (Isa. 30:2) from Assyria's blazing sun. But God sees things differently. He sees that there is nothing behind the beautiful facade. There may be impressive "officials in Zoan" (30:4), the town in the northeastern Nile Delta where the Hebrews were once enslaved (Ps. 78:12, 43), and there may be persuasive "envoys" in "Hanes" (perhaps Heracleopolis, north of Memphis), but there is nothing substantial behind the facade. The great palm tree is rotten in the center. Egypt cannot give any true help. Everyone who puts their trust in Egypt will be disgraced ("put to shame," Isa. 30:5).

This idea of Egypt's helplessness is illustrated in a two-verse (30:6–7) "oracle" or "burden" (Heb. mas's'a'). Isaiah pictures a caravan struggling through a terrible desert, filled with hardships and dangers. This sounds like the Sinai Desert. Perhaps the Assyrian presence on the Philistine plain has already made the direct approach down the coast to Egypt too risky. This caravan is carrying "riches" and "treasures" to Egypt. The mention of "envoys" suggests that this is a diplomatic mission and that the caravan is carrying a large payment for the Egyptian "help."

But in fact, says Isaiah, all the struggle and hardship as well as the great expense are in vain. Egypt really can offer no help; they are "unprofitable." In a final touch of sarcasm, Isaiah creates an oxymoron to describe Egypt. She is "Rahab the Do-Nothing." Rahab is another name for the chaos monster (see comments on "Leviathan," 27:1), that terrifying dragon who is always threatening to destroy the order on which human life depends. But *this* Rahab is far from terrifying. In fact, all she does is sit in one place, not threatening anyone. She is a toothless old monster, too lazy to move.

Judah's Coming Devastation (30:8–18)

ISAIAH NOW PRONOUNCES judgment on the Judeans, who are again called "rebellious people, deceitful children" (30:9). He begins by describing their attitude (30:8–11) and then turns to the specific announcement of the judgment caused by that attitude (30:12–14). Then in a third section (30:15–18), he details what God has invited them to do, what will be the results of their refusal to accept his invitation, and what he must do in response. Most commentators take verse 18 with the third section of the oracle (30:19–26), since this verse has a hopeful tone. However, I believe it is really the conclusion of the judgment messages, as I will try to show.⁵

In 30:8 Isaiah offers the purpose of writing down prophetic words, so that when the predictions came true, people will know it (cf. 8:1, 16; 29:11, 18). He defines the rebellion of the people more clearly. Not only are they unwilling to consult with God when forming their plans, they do not want to hear "the LORD's instruction" (30:9) or "what is right" (30:10). Instead, they ask the prophets to say pleasant things to them. They do not want Isaiah to confront them. Undoubtedly they do not actually ask for "illusions" (30:10), but Isaiah says that is what they are actually asking for when they demand that he stop telling them about "the Holy One of Israel."

Ironically, Isaiah's response to that demand is to tell them "what the Holy One of Israel says" (30:12). The text emphasizes the causal connection between the people's actions and the coming destruction, both with the opening "therefore" and with the subsequent "because." They have "rejected" the truth that God alone can be trusted and instead have trusted in "oppression" and lies, grinding the poor to get money to pay Egypt for its worthless help. As a result, their destruction will come as suddenly as a collapsing wall.

We can imagine a wall whose stones have been leaning a bit more each year, with the result that people have simply gotten used to it. But then one day the center of gravity is passed and in an instant it comes down. So it will be with Assyria. For years Assyria has been threatening, but then the day will suddenly come when Assyria will devastate the land. There will be nothing left. Judah will be like a smashed pot with the pieces so small that they will be useless for any other tasks.

God has told them again and again the prescription for their condition. They must turn back to him in "repentance" and "rest" in him (30:15). In quietly trusting him instead of frantically rushing around trying to solve their problems for themselves, they will find both "salvation" and "strength." But the patient has refused the physician's prescription.

Isaiah 30:16 offers a strong contrast with 30:15. Instead of quietness and trust, there will be rapid flight. There is only one problem with that course of action: The "pursuers" will be swifter yet. If the people rested in God, flight would not be necessary. But because they have refused to trust him, flight will not be enough. Once it becomes apparent that their strength is not enough, retreat will turn into headlong rout, with a "thousand" running from "one," for they will have no inner resources to face any other alternative than victory. As a result, they will be as forlorn as a tattered flag whipping in the wind, with nothing but corpses surrounding it (30:17).

So what is God's course of action in the face of this reality? Will he wash his hands of them? Will he abandon them in a fit of well-justified rage? No, in one of the greatest statements in all of Scripture, he says that since Israel will not wait for (trust in) him, he will have to wait (NIV "longs") to be gracious to them. He "rises" from his throne—not to bring final destruction but to show "compassion." Because he is a "God of justice," those "who wait for him" will never be disappointed. Those who wait for the nations will be disappointed again and again because they are serving themselves and not the causes of right and truth. But God will unfailingly do what is right, and we can depend on him, no matter what. Thus, Isaiah presents the picture of the Creator of the universe patiently standing, waiting for us to discover what fools we have been and to turn back to him to receive the grace and compassion that are in his fatherly heart.

THIS LAST SECTION details what will happen when the Israelites finally come to their senses and turn back to God. Three kinds of promises are made: The first one (30:19–22) involves spiritual regeneration; the second one (30:23–26) speaks of the physical blessings God intends to pour out on his people; the final one (30:27–33) prophesies defeat for all of Israel's enemies, particularly Assyria.

(1) In chapter 6, God said that Isaiah's ministry would simply contribute to the blindness, deafness, and "fat-heartedness" of the people. Perhaps the starkest expression of that condition was the demand that Isaiah stop confronting them with the Holy One of Israel (30:11). But Isaiah sees a day coming when all of that will be changed. The people will "cry" out to God, and he will "answer" them with grace (30:19). The people will no longer be driven from him by "adversity" and "affliction." Rather, their spiritual eyes will be open to see all that he is teaching them through these experiences (30:20).

No longer will they be like a stubborn mule, refusing to turn even when the bit is jerked in the mouth. Now their spiritual ears will be so sensitive they will only need the merest whisper in their ear to turn them to the right or the left (30:21). This will result in a despising of all the expensive idols on which they have lavished such attention and which have meant so much to them. They will be disgusted at the very thought of worshiping such things (30:22).

(2) Verses 23–26 are closely related to the first promise. One of the reasons for worshiping idols was, and is, to secure physical blessings. Here God promises that when his people are responsive to him and have stopped their attempts to manipulate the physical, social, and spiritual world to their own advantage, he will give all those blessings freely. Verses 23–24 express the blessings in agricultural terms. The rain will come at its appointed times, and the harvests will be so plentiful that even the work animals will have food to eat by the shovel-full.

Verses 25–26 contrast "slaughter" with "healing." This may refer to earth's final battle in which Israel's enemies are finally destroyed and Israel, though wounded, triumphs (cf. Zech. 14:1–4; Mal. 4:1–2). It may also refer to the destruction of pride, both that of Israel and the world, because height, barrenness, and darkness are associated with pride elsewhere in the book (Isa. 2:12–17; 8:21–22; 47:5). In any case, barrenness will be replaced with

abundant water, and darkness will be replaced with incredible light. God is the One who gives blessing.

(3) In the final promise (30:27–33), Isaiah recalls the counselors urging an alliance with Egypt because they say that is the only hope for deliverance from the rapacious Assyrians. Isaiah says that if the Judeans want deliverance, they should be looking at God, not Egypt. As in 30:23–26, the language has a certain "end of history" flavor. It is highly emotive and loaded with vivid imagery. Yet verse 31 makes it clear that the ultimate subject of God's wrath here is Assyria. This should make us cautious about what passages we assign as "end-time" promises.

Perhaps the reason for the unusually vivid language here is to convince the hearers of the certainty of the promises. After all, Assyria is the mightiest force on earth, and Judah is small and weak in comparison. So perhaps Isaiah is inspired in this way to try to help the people see that this is not a contest between Judah and Assyria but between Assyria and the most overwhelming Being in the universe. In any case, God promises not just a slap on the wrist for those who oppose him—and in opposing him, opposing reality itself. They will be carried off in a flood (30:28); they will be consumed with fire (30:27, 30, 33); they will be pummeled with hail and pelting rain (30:30); they will stagger under repeated, terrific blows (30:30, 31, 32); they will finally be hurled into the place of endless burning (30:33).

In all of this, one recurring feature is a reference to the Lord's mouth, breath, and voice (30:27, 28, 30, 31, 33). Just as his word is life and health to those who respond to it, it is sudden, terrible death to those who reject it. In Malachi, the same sun that heals the wounded is the one that draws the last moisture from the chaff (4:1–2).

Bridging Contexts

ALLIANCES. Insofar as America today is not, as a nation, the chosen people of God, these passages on trusting the nations do not have the same political relevance to us as they did for Judah. However, the principles remain relevant for Christians. We must ask ourselves why we are entering into dependent relations with people or institutions and what such people or institutions can really offer us.

In the eighth century B.C., Egypt was long past its prime. After about 1000 B.C. it was never again a dominant force in the ancient Near East. After its heyday, Egypt was ruled first by the Libyans from the west. After that, it was ruled by Nubians from the south; they were the ones ruling at this time. The native Egyptians seemed to lack either the energy or the initiative to rule on their own. Thus, Egypt appeared to be powerful but really was not. We do not know how obvious that was, although the Assyrians seemed to recognize it (cf. the field commander's remarks in Isa. 36:6). In any case, those with spiritual discernment recognized the situation. Isaiah saw it in the 700s B.C. and Jeremiah in the 600s.

That is the kind of discernment we need. Are those on whom we are tempted to rely just as weak as we are, though giving a good appearance? Do they have our best interests at heart or only their own? Are we relying on them as a way to avoid the risk of trusting God? Have we sought the guidance of those with spiritual discernment concerning the relationship? Have we sincerely sought God's guidance? In many cases destructive relationships are clear to others around us. Our problem, like the Judeans, is that we are afraid to let go of "the splintered reed" (36:6) and so do not allow ourselves to look at the situation with true discernment. If we would first let go of it mentally and spiritually, God would open our eyes to its dangers.

True and false prophecy. Strikingly, the main difference between true and false prophecy was that false prophets said nice things about their hearers. They said things their hearers wanted to hear. They spoke of peace and prosperity and of God's certain deliverance. The true prophets spoke of these things as well, but they were always in the context of repentance and changed behavior. Those features were notably absent from the preaching of the false prophets. For them the "good news" was unconditional. This is what Isaiah means when he says that people are asking him to "prophesy illusions" (30:10). They are asking him to promise good consequences without appropriate causes.

This is an increasing problem today. Children are not being taught about consequences in life. You can do whatever you like and never have to pay. "Self-esteem" has nothing to do with performance and behavior. Thus, it is emerging that some of the people with the highest self-esteem are thieves and crooks. The triumph of "feel-good" psychology is killing us, because

all of this is an illusion. There are consequences in life, and those in the public eye who teach otherwise are the modern equivalent of the false prophets. They tell us that we can have everything we want with no responsibility for the outcome. One of the tragic examples of this trend is the epidemic increase in male irresponsibility for the children they have fathered. The social costs of this phenomenon are only beginning to be felt. We need prophets who will declare "what is right" and not what a sinful people want to hear.

The dangers of false confidence. Isaiah says that because Judah has refused to trust in God and is choosing instead to depend on Egyptian horses, a thousand Judeans will flee (on those swift horses) from one Assyrian. Because they trust in the wrong things, when those things fail, they will be completely undone.

A similar thing happened outside of Washington, D.C., in 1861. The Union Army had convinced itself that they could dispose of the ragtag Confederate Army in short order. After all, they had smarter uniforms and more up-to-date equipment, and they were better drilled. As a matter of fact, however, they knew little about discipline, determination, and courage —things the Southerners had a good deal of. In the battle, it quickly became apparent that in terms of raw fighting skill, the northern army was badly outclassed. Soon setbacks were turned into defeats, defeats to retreats, and the retreats turned into headlong flight. The picnickers who had come out to watch the "jolly fight" led the rush back to the defenses of Washington.

If we place our confidence in the wrong things, adversity and difficulty will destroy us. We will have no resources to meet them. But if our confidence is in God and not in ourselves, these things will only drive us closer to him. We know that he will not fail us, so we can be faithful, even to death. That kind of fortitude means that defeats do not turn into routs. We can fall back to a new line of defense and fight it out with courage, knowing that God is at our back. The Judeans had forfeited that knowledge by turning to Egypt, just as the overconfident Yankees had trusted in their own superiority.

Apocalypse. In this section of his prophecy, Isaiah blends the vivid imagery often associated with prophecies of the end times with the more prosaic language usually associated with discussions of the present. This blending can be confusing. What is he really talking about—now or then?

But the blending can also be helpful because it reminds us that we live in two times: that which is and that which is to come. The vivid and colorful language is not created by end-time thinking, but rather the thinking is often best expressed with that kind of language. As they look out into the future and contemplate distant and cataclysmic events, the writers can usually best express their points with that kind of sweeping and gripping expression.

But that same kind of expression can also be useful for other purposes, as seems to be the case here, where Isaiah is trying to show the true nature of the enemy Assyria has roused against herself in the Lord. Furthermore, we must be careful in our interpretation of such language. To interpret it overly literally is to run the danger of missing the spiritual points being made by the images. In this case, I believe it is wrong to look for a day when God's people will use tambourines to beat out the rhythm of God's blows on their enemies. The point is to promise that our enemies are God's enemies and that we may rejoice, both now and in the future, in God's defeat of them. The question should not be precisely when these events will occur. Rather, does the confidence that God will defeat my enemies cause me to live in constant trust in him now?

Contemporary Significance

RETURNING TO EGYPT. For the Judeans, their attempt to solve the Assyrian problem for themselves led them back into the very thing God told them not to do, to go back to Egypt, in spirit, at least (see also Hos. 7:11; 9:1–6). Ultimately, of course, some of them returned physically (Jer. 42–43). The same is often true for us. Our attempts to take care of ourselves lead us back into the very things from which God has delivered us in the first place. Why is that?

The writer to the Hebrews refers to this as "the sin that so easily entangles" (Heb. 12:1). There are areas of our lives where we are particularly susceptible to temptation. When we refuse to trust God in some other area of our lives, perhaps one that appears totally unrelated, we effectively take ourselves out from under the protection of God and throw ourselves open to that old area of weakness. Oftentimes, we are weak there precisely because it is something that seems to offer us the pleasure or security or significance we think we must have. When we learn to trust God

for these things and to find them in his ways, not ours, then we experience deliverance from the bondage of those old sins. But when we refuse to trust God in any area, we have cut off the power source and are thrown back onto all our old resources. So it is not surprising that we are defeated at precisely the same points as we were before.

Exchanging God's shadow for a man's. In the Near East, the importance of shade cannot be overemphasized. In many cases, shade from the searing rays of the sun is the difference between life and death. The sun is so direct and so hot that a person can become seriously dehydrated before he or she is aware of danger. So certain psalms refer to God as One who offers protection under his "shade" or his "shadow." The shade may be cast by his outstretched wings (Ps. 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 63:7), a symbol of protection as the parent bird shelters the chicks. But on two occasions God himself casts the shadow in which the believer rests:

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. (Ps. 91:1)

The LORD watches over you—
the LORD is your shade at your right hand;
The sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night. (Ps. 121:5–6)

God's "shade" is an important figure for Isaiah, and we can understand why, with his emphasis on trust. To him it is almost unimaginable that the people of Judah will exchange God's shadow for that of a human being. How can they choose to look to Pharaoh for the protection only God can give? Yet we are prone to the same thing. Of course it is appropriate to place a certain degree of trust in other humans. We trust our spouse; we trust our employer; we trust our pastor. But if those are the ultimate places where we seek shelter from the world, to the point that we exclude God from the picture, we are in for a terrible disappointment, for even the best of humans will fail us.

They will fail us especially if we put them in the place of God in our lives. Any time we expect humans to give us what only God can, we are setting them up to fail because we are asking too much of them. By

contrast, if we have come to the place where God is genuinely the shelter under which we live, we will not be crushed when humans fail us. Because we, living under the protection of God, will be able to be more trustworthy, many of our human relations will be too. But we must have the order right: God first, all others second.

In this regard, it is important to think about the reasons God will not let us put our trust in certain persons or institutions. Why was it wrong for Judah to make an alliance with Egypt? Could not that have been God's way of delivering his people from Assyria? Later on, he did use Persia as the means of delivering the exiles from Babylon (much to the apparent surprise of some; see below on Isa. 45). So there certainly does not seem to have been anything *intrinsically* wrong with God's using Egypt in a similar way.

The chief problem is that the Judeans were making their plans without consulting God. They did not look to Egypt as God's way of delivering them. Instead, they looked to her as *their* way of delivering *themselves*. It is possible that if they had come to God obediently and submissively, he would have sent them in that direction. But sometimes God refuses to let us go in an obvious direction precisely because it keeps us from trusting him.

This may have been the case with Paul and Silas. When they were on their missionary journey through Asia Minor, the obvious path for them was to make a circle back to the east through Bithynia toward their home base in Antioch (Acts 16:6–10). After all, they had been successful in Asia Minor; they had learned "how to do ministry" there. Why not continue to minister in that region and build on that success? To go into the Greek homeland seemed fraught with danger. They had not done this before; they had no base of support there; they were not familiar with the area. But that is where God was sending, and they were obedient.

Since Paul and Silas were obedient, God blessed their ministry. As a result, the world is different. In other words, the principle for us is to start with obedient openness to God, always being aware that he may take us outside our "comfort zone" and put us in a place where we are driven back on him alone. He may use the obvious, but possibly he will use something not at all obvious so that when he delivers us, it will be clear that he did it and no one else.

The character of preaching. One contemporary issue that this passage raises has to do with the nature of preaching. We are told today that people

in the "postmodern age" will not sit still for "judgmental preaching." Isaiah shows us that this is hardly a postmodern phenomenon! It has been with us for 2,700 years. It is a human condition and not associated with any one age.

When Paul spoke to his disciple Timothy about people having "itching ears" and not being willing to sit still for "sound doctrine" (2 Tim. 4:3), he was not speaking about the twenty-first century in the United States. He was talking about the human race in all times and places. People have always wanted to hear good things about themselves and to have their natural inclinations affirmed. There is nothing new in that. If we tailor our preaching to such inclinations, we run the danger of falling in with the false prophets, who did the same thing in Israel and Judah long ago. The great danger is that we get converts who have never truly repented (see below). Instead, they merely add one more item to their portfolio of "life options."

There are two tragic results from this situation. (1) There is no real change of behavior. The "adherent" is just as materialistic and self-centered as before, with no real commitment to the life of the church or the life of faith. They may know something about "commitment," and they may know a veneer of Christian language, but they know nothing about surrender. (2) Such people are powerless when it comes to life's crises. They have no anchor and no resources for facing a crisis with spiritual vitality.

As a result, we have rapidly growing churches but no real salt and light in the society. Some insist that we can first draw people in and later help them to understand the moral demands of the Christian life. But if we do that, we will find the crowds rapidly disappearing. It is easy to gain "adherents," but making "disciples" is another thing. Jesus said that unless people are willing to leave everything in their past lives behind, they cannot be his disciples.

This is not to say we must feed people a steady diet of harsh and bitter condemnation. That is not the way of the Bible or the way of Christian faith. The idea of a message of "good news" is an Old Testament idea before it was a New Testament one (cf. Isa. 52:7; 61:1), and Isaiah's consistent coupling of judgment and hope (including this chapter) shows that this is not the way. But he *did* begin by shedding the stark light of God's holiness on what was taking place in the people's lives. Furthermore, he consistently showed how the hope for them was not that they could

escape judgment but that God would not stop with judgment on them. Some of us need to regain the courage of an Isaiah who when told to "stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel" responded by saying, "This is what the Holy One of Israel says" (30:15).

The connection between repentance and rest. The point just made is underlined by the appeal of God to the people, "In repentance and rest is your salvation" (30:15). Both concepts are important, and each is integrally related to the other. There is no real rest (complete dependence on God) without repentance, and there is no real repentance that does not issue in rest.

The fundamental idea behind repentance in the Old Testament is to turn around or to turn back." It is to stop going in the direction you were, namely, one of self-dependence and self-pleasing, and to turn away from that life to one of depending on God and pleasing him. To talk about resting in the Lord while still keeping hold of one's life and its direction is a contradiction in terms. By the same token, to stop committing certain sins and to "clean up one's act" merely for the sake of avoiding punishment is not to turn back to God. It is only to turn away from sin and may be just as selfish as any other act.

The New Testament development of the idea, as expressed in the term *metanoia*,¹² is the same. To repent is to turn about mentally, spiritually, and behaviorally. It is not surprising that Jesus in his ministry began with a call for repentance: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matt. 4:17); "the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15); "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). Unless we reject the old king, ourselves, and his ways, sin, there is no way we can come into the kingdom of God.

Just as the Old Testament put the correct relationship with God within the context of absolute loyalty to a covenant king, the New Testament calls us to turn from loyalty to ourselves and become the glad subjects of heaven's King. If we find real trust difficult, perhaps it is because there has never been a real change of king in our lives. The idea that we can have the benefits of the kingdom without turning away from our own kingship is a fallacy.

The limits of our resources. When we try to have God's way and our way, as the Judeans did, we effectively say that our way is better. So the

Judeans believed that they could depend on their own strength and cunning to deliver them from their difficulties (30:16). There is only one problem with that, as Jacob discovered. For all his life up until he met his uncle Laban, Jacob had always been able to outthink and outmaneuver everyone around him. Perhaps that is why, when he met God in the dream, he did not actually submit to him but instead tried to strike a deal (Gen. 28:20–22). Fortunately, God is patient, and he was willing to work with Jacob as he found him. This was a good thing for Jacob because in Laban Jacob met a man who could outthink and outmaneuver him. If it had not been for God, Jacob would have disappeared from the pages of history, being merely one more of a shrewd man's conquests.

If we depend on our strength and cunning, there will always be someone stronger and more cunning than we are. That is the message Isaiah gives to his people, and it is the message he gives to us. Depend on your resources and you *will* meet someone with more resources than you. But if you will depend on God's resources, you can be sure that you will never meet anyone with more than your heavenly Father makes available to you. When Paul said, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Phil. 4:13), he was expressing this principle. He stopped trusting in his own accomplishments and discovered that God's resources are endless.

The twofold nature of blessing. In Isaiah 30:19–33 Isaiah emphasizes the key principles of divine blessing. These principles are important for our day. The key point is that blessings are both spiritual and material and that they are inseparably so. It seems today that Christians are either in one ditch or the other. Some contend that the Old Testament promises of physical blessing are all symbolic, referring to the spiritual blessings of the Christian life. Others say that all the promises of the Scripture are to be taken literally, so that the Old Testament promises of riches and abundance are for us today.

I believe there is a middle way between these two extremes. One of the problems with the latter position is that it often sounds like another form of the idolatry that Isaiah says the true believer will despise (30:22). We serve God in order to become rich; we meet certain conditions he lays down so that we can get his blessing. This is simply Christian paganism. When we look at Christ and the apostles, we do not see rich men doing certain religious things so they can get a payoff. In fact, Christ tells his disciples to

reject such ideas. The Beatitudes that begin the Sermon on the Mount specifically repudiate what the world (and some Christian preachers) call blessing (Matt. 5:1–12). As Isaiah says in Isaiah 30:19–22, blessing is a matter of a transformed heart that can take adversity and affliction and see God's hand in them.

But it is also true that God the Father wants to give good things to his children. To say that all the Old Testament promises are only symbolic is to miss the fact that God made humans both material and spiritual and that to restrict the promise of Genesis 1:27 to only one of these aspects is to arbitrarily eliminate one part of his creation. When we repent of the way of trying to supply our needs for ourselves, commit those needs to him in self-denying trust, and delight to serve him for love, two things will happen. (1) We will be living in a way where there is no longer any blockage against all the good things God wants to give us. (2) We will be able to see everything that comes to us as what it really is: an incredible, undeserved blessing from God.

The truth is that for those who seek physical blessings, there is never enough, even in incredible abundance. But for those who seek God, they are able to receive everything that comes from his hand for just what it is, an undeserved blessing. They have learned the truth of his Word, "I shall not be in want" (Ps. 23:1)—and that is enough, because he is enough.

Living in the kingdom. Isaiah 30:27–33 combines the "now" and the "not yet" in an important way. It expresses another aspect of the point just made. We experience the blessings of today, but all the time knowing that there are incredibly greater blessings to come on the other side of the grave. Ironically, the pagan view, having imagined that the invisible world is just like this one, only bigger in every way, ends up devaluing this world, the very model used to construct the other one. The invisible world is the real one, and this one is only a dim reflection of it.

The modern secular view denies that there is any other world than this one. This physical-material world is all there is. But again, the result is to make this world valueless. It came from nowhere and it is going nowhere. So nothing really matters except personal survival—and the sure fact of death makes even that continued survival pointless.

The biblical worldview is markedly different. It insists that this is a real world, where real decisions of great consequence are to be made. The Old

Testament in particular hammers this point. We are not conditioned by a fate determined in that real, unseen world. We may choose to make our lives here and now better, or we may choose to make them worse. But why is this world real? Because it is the product of the invisible Creator, and that leads us to the realization that as real as this world is, it is only part of a larger reality that includes the unseen world.

Thus, Christians live in two worlds. We live here and now and confront the Assyrias of everyday life. We seek to live as obedient subjects of the kingdom of God this very day. But at the same time we know that there is more to come. Just because Assyria is defeated today does not mean that there are no more Assyrias ahead. And we see a world where the kingship of the Creator is not yet fully worked out. So we live faithfully and confidently today, looking to the last day when all God's enemies will be defeated forever and when he, the slain lamb, will ascend his throne and rule his happy subjects forever.

In the same way, we can experience God's kingship in our lives and in our relationships today, but we look for the day when his kingdom will come in all its fullness and his righteous rule will extend throughout all his creation for all time. So we do not devalue this life as we look to the next one, for we know that it is not a different reality than this one, only a fuller one.

Isaiah 31:1–9

WOE TO THOSE who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in the great strength of their horsemen,

but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the LORD.

²Yet he too is wise and can bring disaster; he does not take back his words.

He will rise up against the house of the wicked,

against those who help evildoers.

³But the Egyptians are men and not God; their horses are flesh and not spirit.

When the LORD stretches out his hand, he who helps will stumble, he who is helped will fall; both will perish together.

⁴This is what the LORD says to me:

"As a lion growls,
a great lion over his prey—
and though a whole band of shepherds
is called together against him,
he is not frightened by their shouts
or disturbed by their clamor—
so the LORD Almighty will come down
to do battle on Mount Zion and on its
heights.

⁵Like birds hovering overhead, the LORD Almighty will shield Jerusalem; he will shield it and deliver it, he will 'pass over' it and will rescue it."

⁶Return to him you have so greatly revolted against, O Israelites. ⁷For in that day every one of you will reject the idols of silver and gold your sinful hands have made.

8"Assyria will fall by a sword that is not of man; a sword, not of mortals, will devour them.
They will flee before the sword and their young men will be put to forced labor.
9Their stronghold will fall because of terror; at sight of the battle standard their commanders will panic," declares the LORD, whose fire is in Zion, whose furnace is in Jerusalem.

Original Meaning

CHAPTER 31 says many of the same things that were said at greater length in chapter 30. However, if the chapter break were eliminated and chapters 31 and 32 were combined into one, the new chapter would be about the same length as chapter 30, and that may be what the author or editor intended, since the present chapter 32 is the only one in this section (chs. 28–33) that does not begin with "woe." The present chapter structure probably reflects the fact that beginning with 32:1 there is a new emphasis on the coming King.

Chapter 31 has two sections. Verses 1–3 include the fifth of the woes in this subdivision of the book. As such, it brings the sequence to a kind of a climax. The woe in 28:1 was against the drunken leaders in Ephraim; in

29:1 it was against those in Jerusalem who depended on cultic righteousness; in 29:15 it was against those who tried to hide their counsel from the Lord; in 30:1 it was against "obstinate children" who would not bring to the Lord their plans to make an alliance with Egypt. The present "woe" is specifically against "those who go down to Egypt for help." Thus, the climax (or the nadir) has been reached. Drunken leaders who focus on the wrong things have given ungodly advice that rebellious people have adopted without consulting God.

The result is now baldly stated: They have chosen to trust men and horses instead of "the Holy One of Israel." They have chosen to trust the creation rather than the Creator. This is foolish, as 31:2–3 explains. God is just and will not let those who reject him in order to do evil escape. There is a just order in the world, and to overlook it is a bad mistake. Furthermore, the idea that "flesh" and blood can outface "spirit" is ridiculous. When God raises his fist ("stretches out his hand"), whatever puny help Egypt might offer will be useless. If God chooses to use Assyria to punish his people, there will be nothing in the world the Egyptians can do about it.

Up to here, Isaiah has been counseling the Israelites not to trust Egypt because Egypt cannot help. In 31:4–9, he develops the other side of the argument: Trust the Lord because he is the only One who can deliver you. He makes three points: God will defend Jerusalem (vv. 4–5); turn back to him and away from idols (vv. 6–7); Assyria is no match for the Lord (vv. 8–9).

Some understand 31:4 to be negative, with God attacking Jerusalem.⁴ However, the undoubted positive point of 31:5 argues that "the lion" has come to attack *the enemies of Jerusalem* and cannot be "frightened" off by anything. It is unnecessary to find an equivalent for "the shepherds." The point is simply that the Lord cannot be diverted from his gracious purpose. Verse 5 uses another image from nature to depict the Lord—as a mother bird hovering over her nest, seeking to distract the attacker or, if necessary, to give her own life to protect the nestlings.

Since these promises of the Lord's care are assured, how should Israel respond? Surely they should cease their revolt against God's lordship and "return" to obeying him (31:6). It does not matter how much time and money they may have invested in their "idols" or how beautiful they may be. The fact is that the images and the gods they represent are a human

creation. They have been made with "sinful" human "hands." How can such creations save humans? When it comes down to the bottom line of life or death, what are those things compared to the Creator?

Just as 31:1–3 is the most specific in denouncing the counsel to trust Egypt, so 31:8–9 is the most specific in promising deliverance from the Assyrian threat. The promise that they "will fall by a sword that is not of man" (v. 8) surely sounds like what is described in 37:36, when 185,000 Assyrian soldiers died in one night. Again, Isaiah's main point is that it is much wiser to trust God than Egypt in the face of the Assyrians. The Assyrians will put the Egyptians to flight, but God will put the Assyrians to flight. God is the flame that burns in "Zion," and anyone who puts a hand in that "furnace" will likely get burned.

Bridging Contexts

WHERE IS OUR TRUST? In the ancient Near East at this time, the horse and chariot were something like the "ultimate weapon." When the horse, with its speed and stamina, was hitched to a light two-wheeled chariot on which were a two- or three-man crew, the results could be devastating to unprepared foot soldiers. Along with the driver, there was at least an archer with a powerful compound bow. In some cases there was also a spearman, who could provide additional offensive power as well as defense in tight situations.

These were the elite troops in the armies of the time. They were, of course, expensive to obtain and to maintain. Horses are much more temperamental and delicate than donkeys or other beasts of burden. Furthermore, the chariots, in order to strike the right balance between light weight and durability, had to be carefully crafted and were in constant need of repair. But they were so desirable that even countries like Judah, whose hills and valleys meant chariotry was of limited usefulness, felt they had to have a chariot force.⁵

At this time, another use of the horse was also emerging, perhaps pioneered by the Assyrians. That was cavalry. Here mounted, well-disciplined troops could have a greater massed effect and even more mobility than chariots. The Assyrian field commander's sarcastic comment in 36:8 about the Assyrian king providing Judah with horses if they had

men to ride them might be a way of saying that they were not trained in this latest tactical skill.

Today we look for defense to other kinds of armaments: shell-proof tanks and stealth aircraft and laser-guided missiles. But where is our defense? At the turn of the last century, rifled artillery was the latest thing. But Rudyard Kipling thought along Isaiah's lines when he wrote:

For heathen heart that puts her trust In reeking tube and iron shard All valiant dust that builds on dust And, guarding, calls not Thee to guard, For frantic boast and foolish word, Thy mercy on thy people, Lord!⁶

Nations in a fallen world may need weapons of defense, yet the question still is: Are those the things that give us confidence? Does sleeping with a pistol under my pillow mean I don't have to trust God for my life? What does it mean to trust God and not armaments? Americans have traditionally been uncomfortable maintaining a large peacetime army. As a result, the two world wars caught us unprepared. Yet is that not better than spending a fortune on "valiant dust"? There are no easy answers to these kinds of questions, but we must still ask them, both nationally and personally. What is it I am trusting in?

Contemporary Significance

FULFILLMENT OF PROPHECY. The statements here about God's shielding Jerusalem (31:5) and about his furnace being Jerusalem (31:9) raise questions for us about the appropriate attitude Christians should take toward Jerusalem and Israel today. For many centuries Christians taught that the church was the new Jerusalem and that the Old Testament promises no longer have relevance to the physical place. That changed somewhat during the Crusades, when it was felt to be a sin to leave the Holy Land and Jerusalem in the hands of the Muslims. But after the failure of the Crusades, something of the old attitudes were restored.

In the nineteenth century, however, two things changed that dramatically. (1) One was the rise of Zionism, the conviction among Jews that they would never be secure until they had their own homeland back. (2) The other was the rise of Darbyism or dispensationalism, which took a literal approach to all biblical prophecy. These two together have given a new surge of conviction to the belief that the land of Israel and the city of Jerusalem deserve special care from Christians.

My approach to this question is similar to the one I advocated in the previous section with regard to blessing. I believe there are two extremes to be avoided. On the one hand, it is true that God's ultimate goals with the human race are spiritual. Thus Paul can say that the true children of Abraham are those who are the descendants of Abraham's faith, not his physical body (Gal. 3:6–9). Thus, it does not follow for us to say that we must always defend the actions of modern Israelis, many of whom profess no faith at all, much less the faith of Abraham.

On the other hand, Paul can say that God has not rejected his people but will one day graft them back into the stock from which they have been cut off (Rom. 11:24). This tells us that God still has an interest in that physical people and, by extension, in the land he promised to them. Thus, I believe it is still true to say that for anyone to seek to wrest Jerusalem from the hand of the God of the Bible is to invite serious consequences on themselves. However, while I believe that God's promises for physical Israel will be fulfilled, I suspect they may be fulfilled in very different ways than a simplistic, literal reading of the Bible would suggest. The Jews in Jesus' day read the prophecies of the Messiah in that way and were almost completely unprepared for the way in which they were actually fulfilled. We need to be reading the text with faith and yet openness; God is still the Creator, who loves to do things in new ways.

Isaiah 32:1-8

¹SEE, A KING will reign in righteousness and rulers will rule with justice. ²Each man will be like a shelter from the wind and a refuge from the storm,

like streams of water in the desert and the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land.

³Then the eyes of those who see will no longer be closed, and the ears of those who hear will listen.

⁴The mind of the rash will know and understand, and the stammering tongue will be fluent and clear.

⁵No longer will the fool be called noble nor the scoundrel be highly respected.

⁶For the fool speaks folly, his mind is busy with evil:

He practices ungodliness and spreads error concerning the LORD;

the hungry he leaves empty and from the thirsty he withholds water.

⁷The scoundrel's methods are wicked, he makes up evil schemes to destroy the poor with lies, even when the plea of the needy is just. ⁸But the noble man makes noble plans,

But the noble man makes noble plans, and by noble deeds he stands.

Original Meaning

CHAPTERS 28–29 SPOKE of the false leaders, and chapters 30–31 spoke of their false counsel. Now chapters 32–33¹ speak of the true leader and the characteristics of his reign. The section is divided into four parts. The first is a general introduction (32:1–8), describing the nature of true leadership; the second (32:9–20) describes the Spirit as being necessary for such leadership; in 33:1–16 the necessity of divine intervention on Judah's behalf is explained; finally, 33:17–24 contains a graphic illustration of the rule of the King.

In contrast to the drunkenness, blindness, and confusion of the leaders described in chapters 28–29, the "king" whom God promises here will bring in a completely different atmosphere. His reign will be characterized by "righteousness" and "justice." Who is this king? Scholars have debated whether this is a prediction of the messianic king. While the language is more prosaic than that used in such undoubtedly messianic passages as 9:1–6 and 11:1–16, it is still true that what is described here is more than the best of human kingdoms. Thus, there seems good reason to see this material as God's promise of his Messiah in view of the failure of all the human messiahs.²

"Each man" (32:2) probably refers to the "rulers" (32:1) in the messianic kingdom. Instead of devouring their people for their own sakes (as the false leaders described in chs. 28–29 did), these leaders will be a blessing to their people. Their blessing is described in four vivid similes: a "shelter," a "refuge," "streams of water," and shade in the desert. In this new kingdom the conditions that resulted from Isaiah's ministry (6:9–10) will be drastically reversed (see also 30:20–21). Instead of deafness and blindness, "eyes" will see and "ears" will hear (32:3). Instead of dullness and insensitivity, hearts (NIV "mind") will have knowledge and understanding.

Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel make similar promises about the human heart in the new messianic age (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 36:26). The Messiah will not only rule for his subjects rather than himself, but his subjects will want to know his will and obey it. Furthermore, as intimated in Isa. 2:1–5 and directly stated in 66:19, the Israelites will be able to declare God's Word to the nations with "fluent" and "clear" speech.

In 32:5–8 is a lengthy contrast between the "fool" (*nbl*) and the "noble" (*ndb*). As in the Hebrew language, so in life it is easy to confuse the *nbl* and the *ndb*. In Hebrew thinking, the "fool," like the "scoffer" (see comments on 28:14), is a strongly negative term.³ It describes someone who has consciously rejected God and his ways (32:6; see also Ps. 14:1; 53:1); it is not merely, as in English, someone who is stupid and ridiculous. In fact, the "fool" in the Bible may be someone who is brilliant and attractive. He has simply built his life on a lie (I am accountable to no one but myself) and has dedicated his life to propagating that lie. As a result, the kind of ethics that permeate the Bible are foreign to him. The only language he understands is power. Thus, when it serves his ends, he may do good things for the poor and needy. But if they get in the way of his "schemes," he has no concern for them at all (Isa. 32:7).

Many times in life a "fool" is treated as someone honorable—a "noble"—simply because he has gained power and wealth. That is not the pattern in the Messiah's kingdom. Those are called "noble" whose actions are "noble," that is, generous and giving.⁴ The "plans" and "deeds" of noble persons are for others, not for themselves (32:8). They have learned that the gracious God can be trusted to supply their needs, and thus they no longer need to be grasping but can become giving.

Bridging Contexts

This pattern where the "fool" is called "noble" has been repeated in Europe for centuries. Someone who was really nothing more than a glorified pirate was given the rank of nobility by the king, and with it vast lands and holdings on which he could treat "common" people as he wished. Much of the surge of immigration into America in the 1800s was an attempt to escape the oppression that this system fostered. The tragedy is that this system was not only blessed by the church, but it was perpetuated by it, as wealthy benefactors who were simply trying to buy forgiveness while continuing in their sins were loaded down with ecclesiastical honors.

It was this pattern that drove Francis of Assisi out of the establishment and back to a ministry to the poor. The film *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* powerfully portrays Francis's conflict with a calcified, self-serving church hierarchy. In the end that hierarchy could not deny that the basis of St.

Francis's "revolt" was biblical. Likewise, it was the resistance of the rich and the powerful in England to John Wesley's message of changed living that drove him out of the doors of the established church to preach to the poor, who embraced the message with joy.

Contemporary Significance

WE IN THE CHURCH today run the same danger just described. We need money to run our institutions, so how easy it is to commit the sin described by James in James 2:2–4:

Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

We give honors to people who do not deserve them, to people whose money has been made in sharp but questionable practices—all the time telling ourselves that money has no morality. No, money has no morality, but the people who make it and give it do. It is sometimes urged that by giving our wealthy, and worldly, benefactors an opportunity to give to a good cause, we may be helping them to find a "ministry" and may be able to bring them to a new relationship with the Lord. I do not question the truth of this in principle, but my experience in Christian higher education tells me that the practice often falls far short of the principle. In fact, the "fool" believes that he or she owns you now and has the right to tell you how to conduct your business in a more "up-to-date" (read "less Christian") way. And because we feel "beholden" to our benefactor, we are cautious about offending him or her.

James did not seem to have had this problem. His words to the rich sound as if they come straight from the mouth of an Old Testament prophet (James 5:1–6):

Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.

By all means let us have a ministry to rich "fools." But let our "ministry" not be one of confirming them in their folly by conferring undeserved "nobility" on them. Let our ministry be one of confronting them with the direction and consequences of their lives, thus helping them to find their way to the feet of the Messiah, in whose kingdom they will change their behavior into a truly "noble" kind.

Isaiah 32:9-20

⁹You women who are so complacent, rise up and listen to me; you daughters who feel secure, hear what I have to say! ¹⁰In little more than a year you who feel secure will tremble; the grape harvest will fail, and the harvest of fruit will not come. ¹¹Tremble, you complacent women; shudder, you daughters who feel secure! Strip off your clothes, put sackcloth around your waists. ¹²Beat your breasts for the pleasant fields, for the fruitful vines ¹³and for the land of my people, a land overgrown with thorns and briers ves, mourn for all houses of merriment and for this city of revelry. ¹⁴The fortress will be abandoned, the noisy city deserted; citadel and watchtower will become a wasteland forever. the delight of donkeys, a pasture for flocks. ¹⁵till the Spirit is poured upon us from on and the desert becomes a fertile field. and the fertile field seems like a forest. ¹⁶Justice will dwell in the desert and righteousness live in the fertile field.

17 The fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever.
18 My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest.
19 Though hail flattens the forest and the city is leveled completely,
20 how blessed you will be, sowing your seed by every stream, and letting your cattle and donkeys range free.

Original Meaning

IT HAS BEEN COMMON for critical scholars, imbued with the principles of source and literary criticism, to treat 32:9–14 and 32:15–20 as two originally unrelated pieces brought together more or less accidentally in the editorial process. More recently, commentators such as Childs and Seitz have felt the unsatisfactory nature of this explanation as they seek to understand the text in its present unity. If these texts were originally unrelated, what did later editors see in them to put them together in this way, and if suitable connections can be found to explain their now being together, why could not an original author have put them together?

The unit as it stands now shows a consistent train of thought as it continues to address the issue that everything in chapters 7–39 ultimately goes back to: trust and security. Verses 9–14 condemn "women" who are "complacent" and "secure," apparently because of a good harvest. The prophet tells them that their complacency is terribly misplaced, for in only one year, all that will be changed. They should start mourning now (32:11–12) because of the agricultural disaster about to come on them.

Verse 13, with its use of "thorns and briers," suggests that the prophet has more in mind than a mere physical disaster. This pair has been used in a symbolic way in both chapters 5 and 27 to speak of the spiritual condition of the nation (5:6; 27:4).⁴ Not only will the land itself become barren and

deserted, but this is the condition of the nation as well. "Merriment" and "revelry" will cease (32:13), and all the places where strength and rule could be expected will be abandoned (32:14). All the false trusts will have failed.

But that will not mean God has failed. As so many times previously, the prediction of tragedy and defeat is immediately followed with God's promise of hope (32:15–20). If the nation has trusted in all the wrong things and become barren and unproductive, God has something in mind that will make possible true productivity and security, namely, his own "Spirit" (32:15).

The leaders and the counselors have exhibited a spirit of confusion, self-service, and rebellion. The result has been, and will be, disaster and profound insecurity. But in the context of the messianic kingdom, God has a prescription for that condition. He will pour out his Spirit from "on high." Just as the rain falls and the formerly barren earth springs to life, so the Spirit will fall on barren hearts, and the things that the covenant required but could not produce—"justice" and "righteousness"—will spring up. In place of the frantic busyness that self-dependence requires, those on whom the Spirit falls will be able to live in continual "quietness" and trust (NIV "confidence," 32:17), because they will have truly relinquished their lives into the hands of their covenant Lord. Their "homes" will be places of "peace," trust (NIV "secure"), and "rest" (32:18).

Unlike those whose trust is placed in mere physical circumstances, this rest cannot be disturbed by physical disaster (32:19). Resting in the Spirit of God, they have inner resources of blessing that transcend the changing physical and material world. They have "streams" by which to plant the "seed" of their lives and from which to nourish those who depend on them.

Bridging Contexts

IT IS HARD for those of us who live in an urbanized culture to realize how tenuous was the life of those who lived in the agricultural world of the ancient Near East. This was especially the case in Canaan, where there were no large rivers that could be used for irrigation. Everything depended on the coming of the fall and spring rains. If these rains did not come at the proper time, famine and starvation would result in short order. Furthermore, since

there were no means for long-term storage of food, a good harvest in one year offered no insurance against a bad one the following year. This explains in part the fixation of Canaanite religion—and to some extent, all the ancient Near Eastern religions—on matters of fertility and reproduction. It was truly a matter of life and death from one year to the next.

Perhaps the closest parallel in modern culture to this deep insecurity is that found in the most crime-ridden areas of our inner cities. A recent newspaper article tells of a man whose home has been broken into more than twenty times in the last ten years, despite bars and locks. He says, "I don't know why they keep doing it. I ain't got nothing left to steal!" That is insecurity. When will it happen again? What will they take this time? And where is security to be found? In a new alarm system? Not likely. This is the kind of context in which Isaiah offers an inner security that will produce a godly character even in the least likely circumstances.

Contemporary Significance

WE HAVE ALREADY seen in Isa. 11:1–16 the close association of the Holy Spirit with the messianic promise. It is because the Spirit of the Lord rests on the Messiah that he is able to rule as he does—with justice, knowledge, and the fear of the Lord. Here that connection is broadened. Not only is the Messiah himself to be characterized by the life of the Spirit, so are the members of his kingdom (cf. 32:1–8). John the Baptist underscored this when he differentiated himself from the Messiah by saying that he only baptized with water, whereas the Messiah would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Jesus reiterated this prior to his ascension when he said much the same thing as John had (see Acts 1:5).

But Jesus did not wait until his ascension to connect his ministry with that of the Holy Spirit. We are told in John 7:37–39 that he promised the Spirit to all who would believe in him.

On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

Thus, Jesus says that those who believe in him will not only experience the flowing in of the Holy Spirit, but they will give positive evidence of his presence by the kind of life that flows out from them.

The apostle Paul echoes this same principle in Romans 8. He had said in chapter 7 that the law was unable to produce the kind of defeat of sin in one's life that being identified with Christ necessitated (cf. 6:11). Unless God made some provision for us, the Christian would be as frustrated as the Jew had been in trying to live a godly life. But God has indeed made that provision. The Spirit has come to do in us what the law could not do (8:3–4). The law could provide forgiveness, but it could not enable a person to live a righteous life. So now, just as Isaiah had promised, the Messiah, through the Holy Spirit he has given, makes it possible for Christians to live a life of true nobility—one of generosity and self-giving, one of justice and righteousness, one that the uncertainties of existence cannot ultimately disrupt. There are inner resources with which to meet everything that comes to us and to triumph over them.

Isaiah 33:1-16

WOE TO YOU, O destroyer,
you who have not been destroyed!
Woe to you, O traitor,
you who have not been betrayed!
When you stop destroying,
you will be destroyed;
when you stop betraying,
you will be betrayed.

²O LORD, be gracious to us; we long for you.
Be our strength every morning, our salvation in time of distress.
³At the thunder of your voice, the peoples flee:

when you rise up, the nations scatter.

⁴Your plunder, O nations, is harvested as by young locusts; like a swarm of locusts men pounce on it.

⁵The LORD is exalted, for he dwells on high; he will fill Zion with justice and righteousness.

⁶He will be the sure foundation for your times,

a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge;

the fear of the LORD is the key to this treasure.

⁷Look, their brave men cry aloud in the streets;

the envoys of peace weep bitterly.

8The highways are deserted,
no travelers are on the roads.

The treaty is broken,
its witnesses are despised,
no one is respected.

⁹The land mourns and wastes away, Lebanon is ashamed and withers; Sharon is like the Arabah, and Bashan and Carmel drop their leaves.

10"Now will I arise," says the LORD.
"Now will I be exalted;
now will I be lifted up.

11 You conceive chaff

11 You conceive chaff, you give birth to straw; your breath is a fire that consumes you.

12The peoples will be burned as if to lime; like cut thornbushes they will be set ablaze."

¹³You who are far away, hear what I have done;

you who are near, acknowledge my power!

¹⁴The sinners in Zion are terrified; trembling grips the godless:

"Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire?

Who of us can dwell with everlasting burning?"

¹⁵He who walks righteously and speaks what is right, who rejects gain from extortion and keeps his hand from accepting bribes,
who stops his ears against plots of murder and shuts his eyes against contemplating evil—

16this is the man who will dwell on the heights, whose refuge will be the mountain fortress.

His bread will be supplied, and water will not fail him.

Original Meaning

THIS SECTION CONTINUES the description of the kingdom of the true Messiah. It is introduced by the sixth and final woe in the series begun in chapter 28, but this one is not addressed to the people of Israel or its leaders. It is addressed to the enemy of Jerusalem, almost certainly Assyria. The true king is the one who can bring about the deliverance that the drunken leaders cannot. The unit is divided into two parts. The first (33:1–6) includes the "woe" itself (v. 1) and an appeal to God (v. 2) based on his character and power (vv. 3–6). The second part (33:7–16) begins with a statement of the hopelessness of the situation (vv. 7–9) and moves to a promise by God to take action (vv. 10–16). Surely such a God should be trusted.

The Woe and an Appeal to God (33:1-6)

THE EMPHASIS ON betrayal in 33:1 has suggested to many that the specific occasion for this woe was when Sennacherib accepted Hezekiah's payment to break off his attack on Judah and then did not break off the attack.² However, if that were the case, the material has been placed here in a much larger theological context. The fact that Assyria is not named is indicative of this. All the destructive and deceptive character of earth's nations is used as a foil to depict the radically different character of the biblical God and of the kingdom he will build.

In 33:2 we see the outcome that has been desired throughout this section. Speaking for the people, the prophet says that they will wait (NIV "long") for the Lord (cf. 30:18). Perhaps the Israelites have been forced to because the promised Egyptian help has proven useless. Nevertheless, they are now no longer trusting the nations to deliver them from the nations. They have nowhere else to turn but to God, and Isaiah has no question about God's ability to deliver. When God speaks, "nations" and "peoples" will "scatter." All the "plunder" they have stolen from other nations will be stripped away from them as though by "locusts."

This is so because the Lord is the only One who is truly "exalted" (33:5). All the attempts by humans to exalt themselves by force and deception will ultimately fail, because God alone sits "on high" (cf. 14:4–21). He does not, however, use his position as a justification for oppression. Instead, his character will provide a "foundation" on which people can live with confidence (cf. 28:16–17). That foundation is "justice" and "righteousness" (33:5), and on it can be erected "salvation," "wisdom and knowledge." All of this is available to the person who acknowledges that God is the Lord and gives him reverent obedience: "the fear of the LORD" (33:6).

Deliverance to Come from God (33:7–16)

THIS SECTION, AS noted above, first describes the desperate need for deliverance. Verses 7–9 paint a picture of hopelessness. Again, what is described is consistent with the situation after Sennacherib took Hezekiah's tribute and then refused to leave. There is no place left to turn. The soldiers are crying, and the peace "envoys" are weeping. Neither military strength nor diplomacy can do any good now. Since the "treaty is broken," there is no possibility of further negotiation. That is the last hope; only raw aggression is left. As a result, the roads are empty; everything breathlessly awaits the attack.

Verse 9 depicts the situation in terms of a drought. There is no relief in sight, nor is there cooling breeze or restorative rain. The result is that even in the most fertile areas, those most typically blessed with rainfall —"Lebanon," "Sharon," "Bashan," and "Carmel"—have none; the dead "leaves" are falling from the trees.

But there is hope. There is no Assyria that is greater than God, and God will make that fact plain. He alone will be "exalted." All the great plans of

the destroyer will one day be visited back on itself. In that hour of destruction, it will become plain that all that the destroyer has achieved in plundering the nations is to fill his storehouses with dry "chaff" and "straw," a tinderbox his own "breath" will light (33:11). Assyria started a fire sweeping across the ancient world with its imperial aggression and oppression, and Isaiah says that one day God will bring that fire back on the one who started it. Assyria's own "peoples" (33:12) will be consumed in the blaze. The destruction of Sennacherib's army in Judah is only a foretaste of the destruction of the entire empire less than a hundred years later (621–609 B.C.).

The Assyrians and all the other mighty nations of earth are not the main actors in this scene; the Lord is. It is his "power" (33:13) that rules the earth and brings the empires down to ashes. If the nations produce the tinder and provide the spark, the "consuming fire" is the Lord himself. He is the "everlasting burning" with whom people must somehow come to terms. But how can such a thing possibly be done? If he is the fire that lights the sun and consumes the nations, what incredible mystical operations will be needed for mere humans to "dwell" with him (33:14)!

In fact, there are no arcane mystical rites necessary. For in the end, as Isaiah realized in his vision recorded in chapter 6, it is not God's mystical essence that separates us from himself; rather, it is his character. Thus, it is the "sinners" and the "godless" who tremble before him, not the finite or the mortal. So what is required of us to live in the presence of "the consuming fire"? On the surface remarkably little. All that is required is a change of character on our part.

The opening words of 33:15 give a general description of this character: Do and say "what is right," that is, what is in keeping with some standard. In the Bible that standard is obviously determined by God. In 33:15c–16, the specifics of "right" behavior are spelled out. As is usually the case in such lists, the behaviors are primarily relational. Persons who will survive the fire do not extort money from those weaker than they; they do not accept "bribes" to pervert justice; they will not listen to "plots of murder," nor will they pay attention to anything "evil." That is, they value others just as God values others. Such a person can "dwell" with God on the "heights." In that setting they will be secure ("refuge") and will have all their needs

supplied. God can do what human leaders cannot and what Egypt cannot. Should he not be trusted?

Bridging Contexts

GOD PROMISED THAT the plunder accumulated by the destroying nations would be stripped from them. One of the fulfillments of this promise had to do with the sacred vessels of the temple in Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar carried these vessels off to Babylon (2 Kings 24:13), and Belshazzar went so far as to drink toasts to his gods from them (Dan. 5:2–3). Undoubtedly he did this to demonstrate his and his gods' conquest of the Lord. But one of the first things Cyrus the Persian did after taking Babylon was to offer to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem (2 Chron. 36:23; Ezra 1:2–4; cf. also *ANET*, 316). Where did the money for that enterprise come from? Much of it came from the coffers of conquered Babylon, which in turn had come from places like the Jerusalem temple, stripped of its gold. Cyrus also directed that the vessels of the temple be given to those who were returning so that they could be restored to their rightful place (Ezra 1:8–11).

Today, it is interesting that one of the continuing stories in Europe concerns the restoring of Nazi plunder to its rightful owners. Whence comes this instinct that the plunder ought to be restored? The fact is that the right to the possession of one's property is written on the hearts of God's creation. There is a real sense that ownership of property is a sign of personal identity. Those who have suffered robbery often speak of the sense of personal violation they feel as a result of the theft. This is one more sign of God's lordship in the world. Because God in the Trinity is personal, he values personhood. Therefore, he has given us this sense of individual property rights, which undergirds civil laws around the world. Power may think it can break that creation law, and it may do so for awhile. But since God is God, it cannot do so forever. Right and justice will prevail. It does so now in a proximate way and will do so absolutely in the heavenly kingdom.

One of the characteristics of statecraft, both ancient and modern, is the weighing of alternatives. How much can one get away with? Sennacherib had to decide if there would be enough international displeasure with his breaking his agreement with Hezekiah to make that breach too costly.

Evidently he decided that since he was the only power of any consequence left standing, he could do what he wanted.

Japan made a similar judgment when it decided to break modern rules of warfare in its surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941. The Japanese were gambling that if they could cripple the U.S. Pacific fleet for a few years, they could cement such a hold on the Far East that it would be too expensive for the United States to dislodge them. And who knows how history would have been different if they had been able to destroy the fleet's aircraft carriers and not just its largely obsolescent battleships. But they were not able to do so, and in the end all their plunder was wrested from their grip. God is still God, and the betrayer is still betrayed, and the destroyer is still destroyed.

Contemporary Significance

In the West today, ethics, not only national but personal, have become largely utilitarian. Like Imperial Japan in 1941, we decide what is right on the basis of what we think we can get away with. If it seems good for me at this moment, then I don't care what it does to you. But Isaiah tells us that this kind of personal or national self-exaltation is dangerous. There is only One who is truly exalted, only One who can truly see the end from the beginning, only One who has established what is right out of his own character. There are standards that we violate to our own hurt.

In particular, Christians need to reconsider how the utilitarianism of the day is creeping into our behavior. One of these areas has to do with obedience to the laws of the community in which we live. It is easy to say that something like traffic laws are simply a human creation and have no divine sanction, so that I can obey them or not as I please. What we do not see is that this inevitably erodes all our ethical considerations because those human laws have their authority as an extension of divine legal authority. This is what Paul argues in Romans 13. It is impossible to separate our attitudes toward God's authority from our attitude toward the authority of the human government under which we live.

It is true, of course, that no human authority is absolute; only God's is. If the state ever intrudes itself into the realm of God, there is no question which has priority. But the place where our attitude toward obedience to God is formed and reformed is in our everyday behavior. If we place ourselves above the law in these mundane areas, inevitably we will find ways to do so in the more critical areas of our behavior in respect to God himself. It is no accident that Isa. 33:6 tells us that "the fear of the LORD is the key to this treasure" of "salvation and wisdom and knowledge." If we will not honor the Lord as Almighty God in careful obedience, we can have no meaningful relationship with him.

Like 30:19–20, Isaiah 33:16 addresses the fundamental issues of the book and of the human race: What is the best way to get my most basic needs supplied? As I have already said several times, the basic needs of humans are the same around the world: security, basic physical needs, and comfort and pleasure. All three are closely interrelated. For example, having our basic physical needs supplied in an atmosphere of insecurity and stress will result in sickness. The question in the Garden of Eden is the same question today. Who supplies my needs? The obvious answer is, "Myself; who else?" And the method of supplying the needs seems equally obvious, "By my effort in manipulating the environment in which I find myself."

But Isaiah and the rest of the Bible say something very different. No one says it more dramatically than Jesus Christ: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matt. 6:33). Most of us are so familiar with these words that they have lost their radical nature for us. Jesus is saying that God supplies our needs and does so as a gift. Moreover, they come to us as a by-product, not as a direct result. Do one thing, and this other thing will happen "as well." We don't supply our needs or get them supplied through our efforts. Rather, they get supplied for free to those who demonstrate their allegiance to God's rule.

This is precisely what Isaiah is talking about: Stop trying to save your own necks by making deals with your Egypts or Assyrias and start trying to please God. Leave those other concerns in his hands and focus your attention on becoming what he wants you to be. Then you will discover your needs being supplied in gracious ways you could never have imagined.

This does not necessarily mean you will be uninvolved in the process. For instance, God gave the land of Canaan to his people. They did not take it; that point is made again and again (Josh. 1:2–3; 2:9; etc.). Note how in Joshua 1–5 the people had to spiritually prepare for the Conquest. At the same time, the people were involved in the process of taking the land.

Everything is centered on priorities. Is the maintenance of your relationship to your King primary, or is the King simply another means for you to try to manipulate as you scramble to take care of yourself? If the former is the case, you will discover that in the presence of the Lord a table is spread for you that no one can drive you away from. If the latter is the case, you will discover that no matter how much you accumulate, it is never enough.

The LORD is my Shepherd,
I shall not be in want.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
forever. (Ps. 23:1, 5, 6)

Isaiah makes it plain here in Isaiah 33:14–16 and elsewhere that the mark of being a member of God's kingdom is to behave as the King does. This is the same principle as in the Sinai covenant. Do you want to be my people? Then you must live like me. You must be holy in the same ways that I am holy. This holiness is not first of all a matter of divine essence.³ Rather, it is a matter of character and lifestyle. As in Psalm 15, ritual cleanliness has nothing to do with access to the Holy Place, where sacrifices were given and prayers offered. Rather, it is a matter of behavior. Those who act like God may live in his presence; others "need not apply."

But it is important for us to put this truth into the whole biblical context if we are to understand its significance for us today. This is an important corrective for modern "sinning religion." I was involved in an editorial conference for a modern-language translation of the Bible and heard an older "saint" object to a translation of Romans 6:17–18 that said we are no longer "slaves to sin," because, he said, "we are always enslaved to sin." Thank God that is not so. God expects us to share his character, and we can.

The New Testament will never, however, let us believe that we can *earn* a place in God's house because we live like him. No one can earn a place with God by righteous behavior. Rather, we are *given* that place, just as the Israelites were given freedom from Egypt. God gives us that place because Jesus Christ has died in our place. But once there, how shall we live? The Israelites thought they could obey the commandments in their own strength,

and they failed miserably. But God has not only given us eternal life, he has also given us his Spirit so that we can do what the Israelites could not.

For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. (Rom. 8:13–14)

Isaiah 33:17-24

¹⁷YOUR EYES WILL see the king in his beauty and view a land that stretches afar.

¹⁸In your thoughts you will ponder the former terror:

"Where is that chief officer?

Where is the one who took the revenue?

Where is the officer in charge of the towers?"

¹⁹You will see those arrogant people no more,

those people of an obscure speech, with their strange, incomprehensible tongue.

²⁰Look upon Zion, the city of our festivals; your eyes will see Jerusalem, a peaceful abode, a tent that will not be moved;

its stakes will never be pulled up, nor any of its ropes broken.

²¹There the LORD will be our Mighty One. It will be like a place of broad rivers and streams.

No galley with oars will ride them, no mighty ship will sail them.

²²For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; it is he who will save us.

²³Your rigging hangs loose: The mast is not held secure, the sail is not spread.

Then an abundance of spoils will be divided and even the lame will carry off plunder.

²⁴No one living in Zion will say, "I am ill"; and the sins of those who dwell there will be forgiven.

Original Meaning

THIS SEGMENT CONCLUDES chapters 32–33, which stress that the divinely provided leader will be for Israel what the drunken, confused leaders have never been. He is the gracious promise for which they wait (33:2). This promise was fulfilled in multiple ways throughout Israel's history. It was immediately fulfilled when Hezekiah, the anointed king, trusted God for deliverance and experienced that deliverance in dramatic ways. It was fulfilled later when God delivered his people from Babylonian captivity and restored them to their own land. It was fulfilled in the more distant future when God revealed his Messiah in Jesus Christ. And it will be finally fulfilled in the last days, when the Messiah rules the earth by the rod of his mouth.

In the context of chapter 33, there can be little question that the "king" referred to here is the Lord. Not only is it clear in verses 1–16 that he is the monarch of the earth, but verse 22 specifically identifies "the LORD" as "our king." It is hard to imagine that Isaiah might have Hezekiah, the only likely human claimant in the late 700s, in mind in verse 17 when verse 22 is so specific. Moreover, the realm of Hezekiah was anything but stretching "afar." It was closely constricted.

Instead, the "king" here is the One to whom Hezekiah goes in humble subjection (37:16–20) and who thereby removes the Assyrian siege "towers" and tribute (NIV "revenue") officials from Jerusalem (33:18). This divine king makes it so that the alien Assyrian speech is not heard in Judah for a long time (33:19; cf. 28:11). Now there is "peaceful [secure]" "Zion," a place whose "festivals" will no longer be disgusting to God (cf. 29:1–2). The prophet uses a bit of an oxymoron to describe the city as a permanent

"tent." Perhaps the thought is that all our human habitations are as fragile as tents—and always will be. But if those tents are given over to God, he can make them more secure than the mightiest fortress that is only dependent on human power for its survival (see also 54:2).

From the metaphor of the tent, the author moves to water imagery. The city will have peaceful "rivers and streams" flowing through it. As in Psalm 46, a river is a symbol of peace and abundance. The waves of the sea crash and roar destructively, but a river flows quietly along, providing water for all sorts of constructive uses. Isaiah underscores the peaceful nature of God's supply when he says no vessel of war ("galley") will sail on the rivers of Zion. Why? Because of the righteous character of the Lord, who is Israel's "king" (33:22). He will bring in order ("judge"); he will bring in obedience to the Torah ("lawgiver"). He is Moses, Samuel, and David all rolled together. With One like that in charge, peace and prosperity are assured—even better, salvation. Such a One can deliver us from any situation of life, whether it be aggression from enemies, or a broken law, or a world of disorder.

It is not clear who is being addressed in the first half of Isa. 33:23. However, in the overall context, it is most likely the destroying, betraying nation with which the chapter began. This warship tried to sail against Zion, but it came up against a greater enemy in the Lord than it had planned for. Like a mighty windstorm he has whirled down on them, leaving the "sail" collapsed and the "rigging" sagging. Thus, all the "plunder" they had collected will be carried off by their intended victims (cf. 33:4).²

The final promise for the "Zion" ruled by the Messiah is that it will be a place of health, both physical and spiritual. All the effects of "sin" will be done away with, and creation will be seen again in the manner in which it was first intended.

Bridging Contexts

It is hard for those of us who live in democratic countries to relate to this emphasis on a king, since we have had a long tradition of government by the people. However, it does not take much disorder in our lives before we begin to clamor for a strong leader. This is what happened in Germany in the 1930s. To be sure, their experience of representative democracy was

limited, but they were a strong, capable people. Nevertheless, when the Weimar Republic began to come apart with raging inflation and widespread unemployment, Hitler had no difficulty in convincing the German populace to give him all the powers of a king and then some.

The same thing had happened earlier in Russia. When the inept Czar Nicholas was finally deposed, the situation in Russia was chaotic. In that setting, Lenin was able to impose his will on the nation and become in effect the new czar. Tragically, he proved much more despotic than Nicholas had been. In the United States in the 1930s, many Americans were more than willing to make Franklin Roosevelt president-for-life. To be sure, his powers were sharply circumscribed by the Constitution and by Congress. Nevertheless, the similarity is clear: When society and government begin to break down, we want a strong leader to take charge. That is what Isaiah is promising his people. God will give them a leader who is both strong and righteous, visionary and compassionate.

Contemporary Significance

As NOTED ABOVE, we can apply this message to at least four different historic settings. The first is in Isaiah's own day, as godly Hezekiah led his people to trust God and in so doing led them into a wonderful experience of God's power and trustworthiness. The second is the deliverance from Babylon that was completed during the time of Nehemiah, Ezra, and Malachi. The people of Judah once again experienced a secure Zion where God's bounty was provided. The fourth is in the consummation of all things, when there will be no rival to God's kingdom. The third is the one in which we live today, the one in which God's Messiah has been fully revealed and in which we see that God's promises are spiritual before they are physical.

One of the ways in which the revelation of Christ solves a potential problem in this passage as well as other messianic promises in the Old Testament is in his divinity. On the one hand, we see a king who is human. Isaiah 32:1–8 depicts a realm in which humans are active. To be sure, they are active in remarkable ways, but it is still a human realm that is being described.³ On the other hand, the king described here in chapter 33 can be

none other than the Lord—but he is the Lord who somehow fulfills the role previously filled by humans: judge, lawgiver, king.

When we think of what is called the first Christian creed ("Jesus is Lord," cf. Rom. 10:9) and recognize Jesus as the God-Man, this apparent contradiction is resolved. God rules both on earth and in heaven. He does not rule from heaven as an absentee ruler, nor does he rule on earth as a limited and finite human. We can imagine the prophet puzzling over what he has said, and wondering like Mary did many centuries later, "How can these things be?" They can be if the human Messiah is also the divine King.

What does Christ offer us today? Several things emerge from this passage. He offers beauty and wide opportunities (Isa. 33:17). He offers security (33:18–20). He offers us deliverance (33:22). He offers us health in its most comprehensive form (33:24). We may think of *beauty* as a nonessential, but that is obviously not how God sees it. When we look at creation, we see an abundance of things beautiful. Why is beauty a characteristic of this heavenly-earthly King? Among the factors that make for beauty are harmony, symmetry, rhythm, and balance. When Christ becomes the King of our lives, these are some of the things he brings to us. He is in perfect harmony with the Father as he lives out a life of rhythmic giving and receiving. He is never off-balance, attempting to secure his own will. In the quiet confidence of the Father's provision, there is a serenity and a wholeness that shines out of him. He offers this same beauty to us.

In Christ there are *endless opportunities*. He does not press us into a mold in order to produce robots who will serve him. Rather, he calls us friends, allowing each of us to achieve the maximum of what we were designed for. He allows each of us to develop in our own way because he, our King, delights to serve us. In such a relationship and with all the power of heaven at our disposal, even the most restrictive of earth's situations offers endless openings.

In Christ there is complete *security*. When we know that even in our darkest hour we were loved by him, we know that there is nothing we can do to make him stop loving us. Nothing can wrench us out of his hand. Could a day come when we demand that he let us go? Yes, that possibility exists. But until such a time, we are held in an unfailing grip. Inside that shelter we dare anything, knowing that in even the most tragic failure, we are his and he is ours.

In Christ there is *health*. Like beauty, there is both outer health and inner health, and the two are closely connected. When our sins are forgiven and our future is assured, and when we have the confidence of full provision for our needs, we can rest in him. In a rest like that, there is a soul health that will have an impact on our physical health. And even if the "earthly temple" is falling into that inevitable decay that is the fate of all until Christ returns, our inner life may radiate health and wholeness through Christ.

Isaiah 34:1-17

COME NEAR, YOU nations, and listen; pay attention, you peoples! Let the earth hear, and all that is in it, the world, and all that comes out of it! ²The LORD is angry with all nations; his wrath is upon all their armies. He will totally destroy them, he will give them over to slaughter. ³Their slain will be thrown out. their dead bodies will send up a stench: the mountains will be soaked with their blood. ⁴All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shriveled figs from the fig tree.

⁵My sword has drunk its fill in the heavens; see, it descends in judgment on Edom, the people I have totally destroyed.
⁶The sword of the LORD is bathed in blood, it is covered with fat—the blood of lambs and goats, fat from the kidneys of rams.
For the LORD has a sacrifice in Bozrah and a great slaughter in Edom.
⁷And the wild oxen will fall with them, the bull calves and the great bulls.
Their land will be drenched with blood,

and the dust will be soaked with fat.

- ⁸For the LORD has a day of vengeance, a year of retribution, to uphold Zion's cause.
- ⁹Edom's streams will be turned into pitch, her dust into burning sulfur; her land will become blazing pitch!
- ¹⁰It will not be quenched night and day; its smoke will rise forever.
- From generation to generation it will lie desolate;

no one will ever pass through it again.

- ¹¹The desert owl and screech owl will possess it;
 - the great owl and the raven will nest there.
- God will stretch out over Edom the measuring line of chaos and the plumb line of desolation.
- ¹²Her nobles will have nothing there to be called a kingdom,
 - all her princes will vanish away.
- ¹³Thorns will overrun her citadels, nettles and brambles her strongholds.
- She will become a haunt for jackals, a home for owls.
- ¹⁴Desert creatures will meet with hyenas, and wild goats will bleat to each other;
- there the night creatures will also repose and find for themselves places of rest.
- 15The owl will nest there and lay eggs, she will hatch them, and care for her young under the shadow of her wings;
- there also the falcons will gather, each with its mate.

¹⁶Look in the scroll of the LORD and read:

None of these will be missing,
not one will lack her mate.

For it is his mouth that has given the order,
and his Spirit will gather them
together.

17He allots their portions;
his hand distributes them by measure.

They will possess it forever
and dwell there from generation to
generation.

Original Meaning

CHAPTERS 34–35 OFFER a conclusion not only to chapters 28–33, but more largely to all of chapters 13–33. Throughout chapter 7–39, which I have entitled "Lessons in Trust" (see outline), God through the prophet has been showing the people of Israel why they should trust him and not the nations. Now in chapters 34–35 the alternatives are depicted in glaring contrast. To trust the nations is to become a desert (ch. 34), but God can be trusted so that even if we have chosen the nations, he can make the desert burst forth with flowers (ch. 35). The point should be clear: Trust God!

Chapter 34 is composed of two parts. The first (vv. 1–4) is a general announcement of judgment on the nations of the earth. Then this announcement is particularized by applying it to the nation of Edom (vv. 5–17). In this case, the graphic illustration is three times as long as the general statement it illustrates.

General Announcement of Judgment (34:1–4)

THE GENERAL ANNOUNCEMENT of judgment sounds a good deal like the opening stanzas of chapters 13 and 24. The language is that of the court. God calls the defendants, the "nations" and the "peoples," to hear the decree pronounced against them. But the judgment does not merely involve the "earth"; it affects the entire cosmos, with the "stars" being "dissolved" and the "sky rolled up" (34:4).²

God's anger is particularly directed against the "armies," which aptly symbolize the arrogance and pride of "nations." He will devote them to complete destruction (34:2). The verb used here (and the corresponding noun in v. 5) is *hrm*, which speaks of ritual destruction for offenses against God. It is the same term used of the Canaanites in Joshua 6:17 and of the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15:3. This is not merely a contest to see who is stronger; it is a conflict between the Creator and those who have rebelled against him, a conflict with cosmic consequences.

Edom As an Example (34:5–17)

WHEN IT IS ASKED why Edom should be singled out to represent the nations of the earth in their hostility to God and their eventual destruction, the answer seems clear. As early as the entry of Israel into the land of Canaan, Edom opposed God's plan (Num. 20:14–21). This hostility continued through the kingdom period, with one king after another having to face warfare with the Edomites.³ In Psalm 60:9 Edom is used in a representative way. Ultimately the antagonism issued in the Edomites assisting Babylon in sacking Jerusalem (Ps. 137:7; Obad. 10–14).

The section on Edom can be divided in two parts. The first (Isa. 34:5-8) begins and ends with the causal ki, "for" (the first is not translated in the NIV). These verses speak of the bloody destruction that is going to fall on Edom for Zion's sake. The second part (34:9-17) speaks of the desert that Edom will become. It will be a home for unclean birds and animals.

As already noted, *hrm* is repeated in verse 5, which emphasizes the representative role of Edom among the nations. The repetition of "blood" and "fat" (vv. 6–7), terms commonly used in instructions for sacrifices, makes the sacrificial setting that much clearer. The nations of earth, refusing God's grace, have become the sacrifice for their own sin. "Wild oxen" and "bulls" are the symbols of great strength and the rampaging assertion of the will. But the Lord will hold his creatures accountable for their behavior. There will be a payback, not merely as a negative judgment on sin but also on behalf of the faithful, who are integral to God's plan to redeem the earth. The destruction of the nations is intended "to uphold Zion's cause."

The description in 34:9–17 goes into considerable detail to make its point. The language of verses 9–10 is reminiscent of the destruction of

Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. It is also appropriate to the region at the south end of the Dead Sea, where Edom is located. It is a barren land, where "pitch" and "sulfur" deposits can be found. This may be another reason why Edom is chosen to represent the destruction of the nations: Its territory is largely desert, which is nearly uninhabitable. Thus it fits what Isaiah wants to say about the results of trusting human glory.

To underline his point about the uninhabitability of this desert, the prophet stresses that it will become the home of all the unclean birds and animals (Isa. 34:11–15). There is considerable discussion about the precise identity of many of the birds and animals listed here, and different translations show some variation. But the general point is clear: No human can live there, and if they could, they would not want to. The Creator has reassigned it to inhabitants other than human. In verse 11 "measuring line" and "plumb line" are used in an ironic way. These tools were normally used in construction with positive results. But since God is the Maker, he has the capacity to use tools in different ways. Edom has not lived up to the Creator's standards. Therefore, those standards will be used as the measurements for destruction.⁴

Verses 16–17 assert that this prediction about the birds and animals nesting in Edom is a certainty. To establish this certainty, the prophet appeals to "the scroll of the LORD," where the hearer can supposedly read that each of the animals mentioned will be there. In the book of nature as established by the "mouth" of God, there are certain fixed realities, like the mating of animals. Just as God has assigned the places and conditions of the animals, so he has also assigned the places and conditions of humans. He is like a landowner who can divide up the plots of land as he wishes. Thus, there is a fixed rule in the moral universe that is no more changeable than the laws of nature. The nations of the earth have chosen to flaunt their rebellion and must pay the price for doing so.

Bridging Contexts

ONE MAJOR AREA of this chapter poses a problem for us today. Most of us are far removed from the world of bloodshed. If we encounter it at all, we see it through the distancing eye of the television camera or the movie camera. It is not a part of our lives. We eat meat, but we never give a

thought to the butchering process. Moreover, apart from the horrifying slaughter that took place on the Civil War battlefields, those of us who are Americans have been by and large insulated from warfare and bloodshed in our own land.

Neither of these were true for Isaiah's first hearers. Blood and gore were a part of their everyday life. They took it as a matter of course. The whole family was involved in the butchering process, and sadly, they knew at firsthand the realities of brutal warfare. Thus, one of the things they fervently hoped for was that the people who had brutally slaughtered their family members would someday have "a taste of their own medicine." Thus, language that we find horrifying and offensive was probably actually comforting to many of those first hearers. There was going to be justice in the world after all. Though the "poor" and the "needy" of Judah may be too weak and helpless to redress the balance of the scales of justice, a day would come when God would do it for them, and the Edoms of the world would pay for what they had done.

Almost certainly this is why Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh. He wanted the Assyrians to suffer for all the suffering they had brought to Israel. But he knew how compassionate God really is and that if even an Assyrian would repent, God would not impose the judgment on them. He wanted the Assyrians to pay.

How can we relate this to our own times? We may think of the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City. It was interesting to hear persons who lost family members in the bombing speak of the impending execution of the convicted bomber. There was not a lot of passion in their voices, nor was there any of the feel of a mob demanding blood. But there was a sense that they could not feel "closure" in their own experience until the one who made the bomb had paid the full price for his crime. So even though we may not feel comfortable with the language of blood and slaughter that Isaiah uses, when the experience does come home to us, we want the scales of justice balanced. And if we will not let God place his Son in the balance for us, then justice says that we ourselves must take that place and go to destruction with Edom.

Contemporary Significance

TRUSTING THE CREATURE. How do we in the contemporary world relate to such a savage text? First, we must relate to it in its literary context. As I have tried to demonstrate above, it functions to draw together all that has been said in the previous chapters about the folly of trusting the nations. Thus, as we read it today, we must ask ourselves where our trust really resides. Does it reside in the Edoms of the world? If so, we are headed into the desert with those Edoms. To put our ultimate trust in creatures instead of the Creator is truly stupid. It is to fly in the face of reality and ultimately to crash into that reality with devastating effect.

But how do we know whether we are trusting the creature or not? Most of us are not in a position to affect national policy about alliances, so what do all these admonitions have to do with us? They touch our lives at two points: the church and our own personal walk.

- (1) To trust the nations is to trust the glory of humanity. What are our churches trusting in? Large budgets, impressive plant, powerful preaching? If so, we have put our trust in the creature. The place given to prayer in a local congregation is a good measure of where a church's trust really is. If its only focused praying is the Sunday morning pastoral prayer, that congregation is headed into the desert. Whatever they may say, they as a church are trusting the creature. By contrast, when a congregation like the Brooklyn Tabernacle makes real, earnest prayer a top priority, it is actually making a practice of trusting God and is headed into a garden. The pastor who teaches the congregation to pray and the congregation who teaches their pastor to pray has gone far toward a change of allegiance from the world to God.
- (2) This chapter touches us personally as well. Does my life have too many of the features of a desert? Is it possible that I have been trusting humanity, myself included, for what only God can give? What does it mean to trust God radically? Sometimes it means deliberately not doing what I could for myself and letting God do it instead. Sometimes it means taking a radical step of faith without the absolute assurance that the ground is there to step on. We may think of the main character in the film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, when he is faced with a chasm he cannot cross. Remembering words he had been told previously, he steps off into the chasm, and suddenly a walkway appears under his feet.

Have we ever given God a chance to do that kind of thing in our lives? Or has everything been so carefully planned and organized that God has no room to work? If so, a day will come when we are unable to solve the problem with our plans, organization, and effort. Then we will cry, "God, why have you abandoned me?" And the answer will be, "I have not, but because you never learned to trust me in the easy times, you don't know how to trust me now."

Vengeance. How do the passionate promises of vengeance apply to the life of the contemporary Christian? Do not Jesus' words about turning the other cheek and loving our enemies radically contradict these words of Isaiah? In fact, may we not say that this is a "pre-Christian" text that has been invalidated by the New Testament? The answer to both questions is "No." These words and those of the New Testament are closely interrelated.

The key idea here is that of Paul found in Romans 12:19: "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord." How can we find the grace not to seek revenge? It is precisely in the knowledge that there is a just Judge of all the universe who will see that justice is done in the end. We do not need to destroy the Edom that may have crushed us under its heavy boot because we can trust God to do the right thing in the end, both for Edom and us.

How freeing this is. It takes the justice of the world off our shoulders and frees us from carrying around a heavy load of anger and resentment. Surely one of the things that brought down President Nixon in the end was his "list of enemies." If he and his staff had been less concerned about their enemies and more concerned simply to do what is right in the confidence that God would redress the balances, the Watergate scandal might never have happened.

Isaiah 35:1-10

THE DESERT AND the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.

Like the crocus, ²it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God.

3Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; 4say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you."

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.
The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

⁸And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness.

The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go about on it.

No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious beast get up on it; they will not be found there.

But only the redeemed will walk there,

10 and the ransomed of the LORD will return.

They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them,

Original Meaning

and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

THIS CHAPTER IS the mirror image of Isaiah 34. That passage spoke of the fate of the arrogant nations and all who trusted in them. This one speaks of the destiny of those who turn from that path to a resolute trust in God. It may be argued that there is no mention of trust in this chapter (or in ch. 34, for that matter). That is certainly correct. However, the larger context on both sides of these chapters makes the point clear enough. Throughout chapters 28–33, the central issue was the stupid advice of the leaders that the Judeans should trust Egypt. In chapter 36, the Assyrian officer will mock the idea of trusting God. Thus, even though the words are not used here, the question of trust is the underlying concept. What happens if we trust in God instead of the nations? The answer to that question is beautifully presented here.

First of all, in a powerful contrast, God will turn the "desert" into a garden (35:1). The "burning sand will become a pool," and the places "where jackals once lay" will become grassy meadows (35:7). These latter statements certainly make it appear that they are intended as a direct reference to the preceding chapter. Even the desolation that endured from generation to generation (34:10, 17) can be changed by God if we will let

him. God will display his "glory" to his people by restoring them, making them as rich and abundant as the forests on "Lebanon" and "Carmel" or the grasslands of the plain of "Sharon" (35:2; cf. 33:9). When the rains of God fall, what appeared to be a barren waste springs into riotous color almost overnight.

Verses 3–6a and 8 make it plain that this restoration is a spiritual one. Those who are discouraged and fearful will be given courage and strength. They have remained faithful while the nation has gone down and down. They have seen evil triumph again and again, and they have wondered if God's day would ever come. But, as I commented on chapter 34, the Lord will balance the scales of justice, and they will see the day when both wickedness and righteousness receive their true reward from God. Furthermore, in an apparent allusion to Isaiah 6, the promise is made that those who did not remain faithful—the "blind" and the "deaf," the spiritually "lame" and "mute"—will be delivered from their afflictions and become full participants in the community of faith.

This idea is furthered with an additional image in 35:8–10, namely, that of a "highway." In the rugged highlands of Judah and Ephraim as well as in the desert east and south of Judah's central ridge, a straight and level highway would be a wonderful thing. That is what God promises to those who will turn to him in trust. He will make a way through the most difficult circumstances. Note that this is another contrast with chapter 34. In 34:10, the prophet said the conditions of the desert would obstruct all passage. But that is not the case in God's country. There is ready access to him and to all the blessings of his creation.

This highway is the way to God, as seen in its title, "the Way of Holiness." The meaning of the phrase is further spelled out in 35:8–9. Negatively, there will be no one "unclean" on it, there will be no "fools" there, 3 nor will there be any devouring animals. Positively, God's way is a way of purity, obedience, and safety. It is the way of holiness on which the "redeemed" walk. Verse 10 describes the end result of this journey through the desert. It is to come to the city of God, Zion, where "gladness" and "joy" will forever displace "sorrow and sighing" (cf. 25:7–8).

FOR THOSE OF US who have lived through the creation of the modern superhighway system, the picture of the highway here is vivid. We can remember when a journey of two hundred miles would take five or six hours as we crawled through small towns with their many traffic lights or crept up long hills behind heavy trucks. What a great day it was when the new interstate highway opened up and that same journey could be covered in about three hours. That is the kind of thought expressed here. God does not want to place any barriers in the way of people coming to him. If there are barriers, they are of our making, not his. He does not want us winding our way through a mountainous desert on a pothole-filled, two-lane highway, where drug lords rule. He wants us to come to him with pleasant companions on a four-lane highway through a garden spot, where each new vista is more charming than the last. This is what God promises to those who will abandon their trust in humanity and hurl themselves on him.

Contemporary Significance

Two comings are described in this chapter: the coming of God to his people, and the coming of the people to God's house. Both are necessary, and this is the proper order. We humans have made our world into a desert and are helpless in it. We can intuit that there is a God to whom we are accountable, but we don't know who or what he is. All our attempts to reach him or even describe him founder on the depravity of our nature and the inadequacy of our ability to communicate (e.g., the Tower of Babel, Gen. 11:1–9). God is other than we, and we are unable to even imagine him except as being a duplicate of ourselves.

But that way lies a barren desert. If God is only humanity written large, then he is just as much subject to fate as we are; he is just as much in the dark about the future as we are and just as unable to change his moral behavior. For him too, survival at all costs is all that matters—a survival that depends on rightly assessing where the power is and determining how to seize and hold it. I say again: That way lies a desert.

But God is radically other than we, and that means we can never know him unless he first comes to us. He must take the initiative both to disclose himself to us and then to deliver us from the desert into which we have condemned ourselves. We are helpless, both in our ignorance and in our sin. This is some of the meaning of the deceptively simple statements with which the Gospel of John opens:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1–5, 14)

At the heart of God is communication. It is not an afterthought or an "add-on." Where God is, there is communication. The creation itself is an expression of that communication. And since creation has fallen and an additional barrier other than finiteness, the one of sin, has been placed between us, God has come to this earth to be one of us. He did that because there was no other way in which we could see what his true glory consists of (cf. Isa. 35:2).

But his self-revelation is not merely to impart true information, because the imparting of information is only the thinnest edge of communication. Real communication involves the sharing of personality. That is not possible for those sunk in despair and discouragement (35:3–4). Neither is it possible for those who have been spiritually crippled by their own sin (35:5–6). If God is to communicate his person to us, those barriers will have to be broken down. That is exactly what he did in the Word, Jesus Christ. "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ," says Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:19. He reconciled the world *to himself* by coming all the way to us.

Why has he come? *In order that we might come to him*. Throughout the Scriptures life with God is described as a walk. Abraham was told to "walk before me and be blameless" (Gen. 17:1). Moses told the Hebrews that the

fulfillment of God's commands involved walking "in all his ways," which involved serving and loving him with one's whole "heart" (Deut. 10:12). Hezekiah asked God for a longer life because he had "walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion" (2 Kings 20:3). Jesus told his disciples to "walk while you have the light" (John 12:35). First John 2:6 says that those who claim "to live in him must walk as Jesus did." Paul prefers the more abstract "manner of life" (cf. Phil. 1:27), but he has the same concept in mind (cf. Eph. 5:2, "walk in love"). Life with God is not static.

In other words, God has not delivered us from our sins so that we can simply sit and contemplate our saved condition until the day we die. Rather, he has delivered us from our sin so that we can participate in his life and character in a progressive, ongoing way. This is what Paul has in mind when he says that believers are to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phil. 2:12–13). God has come to us and day by day makes it possible for us to walk with him in greater and greater likeness to him, until that last day when we arrive in the heavenly city where gladness will displace sorrow forever.

Isaiah 36:1–37:7

In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah's reign, Sennacherib king of Assyria attacked all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. ²Then the king of Assyria sent his field commander with a large army from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem. When the commander stopped at the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Washerman's Field, ³Eliakim son of Hilkiah the palace administrator, Shebna the secretary, and Joah son of Asaph the recorder went out to him.

⁴The field commander said to them, "Tell Hezekiah.

"This is what the great king, the king of Assyria, says: On what are you basing this confidence of yours? ⁵You say you have strategy and military strength—but you speak only empty words. On whom are you depending, that you rebel against me? ⁶Look now, you are depending on Egypt, that splintered reed of a staff, which pierces a man's hand and wounds him if he leans on it! Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who depend on him. ⁷And if you say to me, "We are depending on the LORD our God"—isn't he the one whose high places and altars Hezekiah removed, saying to Judah and Jerusalem, "You must worship before this altar"?

8... Come now, make a bargain with my master, the king of Assyria: I will give you two thousand horses—if you can put riders on them! ⁹How then can you repulse one

officer of the least of my master's officials, even though you are depending on Egypt for chariots and horsemen?

10 Furthermore, have I come to attack and destroy this land without the LORD? The LORD himself told me to march against this country and destroy it."

¹¹Then Eliakim, Shebna and Joah said to the field commander, "Please speak to your servants in Aramaic, since we understand it. Don't speak to us in Hebrew in the hearing of the people on the wall."

¹²But the commander replied, "Was it only to your master and you that my master sent me to say these things, and not to the men sitting on the wall—who, like you, will have to eat their own filth and drink their own urine?"

¹³Then the commander stood and called out in Hebrew, "Hear the words of the great king, the king of Assyria! ¹⁴This is what the king says: Do not let Hezekiah deceive you. He cannot deliver you! ¹⁵Do not let Hezekiah persuade you to trust in the LORD when he says, 'The LORD will surely deliver us; this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.'

¹⁶"Do not listen to Hezekiah. This is what the king of Assyria says: Make peace with me and come out to me. Then every one of you will eat from his own vine and fig tree and drink water from his own cistern, ¹⁷until I come and take you to a land like your own—a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards.

¹⁸"Do not let Hezekiah mislead you when he says, 'The LORD will deliver us.' Has the god of any nation ever delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? ¹⁹Where are the gods of Hamath

and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they rescued Samaria from my hand? ²⁰Who of all the gods of these countries has been able to save his land from me? How then can the LORD deliver Jerusalem from my hand?"

²¹But the people remained silent and said nothing in reply, because the king had commanded, "Do not answer him."

²²Then Eliakim son of Hilkiah the palace administrator, Shebna the secretary, and Joah son of Asaph the recorder went to Hezekiah, with their clothes torn, and told him what the field commander had said.

37:1When King Hezekiah heard this, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and went into the temple of the LORD. ²He sent Eliakim the palace administrator, Shebna the secretary, and the leading priests, all wearing sackcloth, to the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz. ³They told him, "This is what Hezekiah says: This day is a day of distress and rebuke and disgrace, as when children come to the point of birth and there is no strength to deliver them. ⁴It may be that the LORD your God will hear the words of the field commander, whom his master, the king of Assyria, has sent to ridicule the living God, and that he will rebuke him for the words the LORD your God has heard. Therefore pray for the remnant that still survives."

⁵When King Hezekiah's officials came to Isaiah, ⁶Isaiah said to them, "Tell your master, 'This is what the LORD says: Do not be afraid of what you have heard—those words with which the underlings of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me. ⁷Listen! I am going to put a spirit in him so that when he hears a certain report, he will return to his own country, and there I will have him cut down with the sword."

Original Meaning

ISAIAH 36–39 FORMS the last section in the second major subdivision in the book (chs. 7–39, see outline). Its three subsections are all focused on the question: Shall we put our trust in God or in the nations? (1) In chapters 7–12, Ahaz gave the wrong answer to Isaiah, and the implications of that response are explored both for the near term and the long term, especially as it provides the basis for the coming messianic kingdom.

- (2) Chapters 13–35 then explain why trust in the nations is so foolish. All human beings are under the judgment of Israel's Holy One (chs. 13–23), who will bring history to a close with the redemption of the faithful of all nations as well as his own people (chs. 24–27). These general truths are applied to the specific circumstances leading up to the attack by the Assyrian Sennacherib in 701 B.C. (chs. 28–35). Isaiah speaks forcefully against the folly of trusting Egypt instead of God in that situation.
- (3) After these lessons in trust, the test as to whether to trust God or the nations is administered once again, this time to the son of Ahaz, Hezekiah. Thus, Isaiah 36–39 is anything but a historical appendix. These chapters are the climax of the whole argument of the book to this point. The prophet has asserted over and over again that God can be trusted. But is that all just rhetoric? Are they just words that have no historical significance? No, everything the prophet has said is true. The only question is whether anyone is listening or not. In the upshot, the answer is a short-term "yes" but a long-term "no."

It is the combination of these two answers that sets the stage for this section. Because Hezekiah says "yes," the sovereign power and unique trustworthiness of God are demonstrated and do not need any further explanation. The point of God's absolute rule over the world and his ability to care for those who trust him has been made, and now it is possible to move on to further points in God's and the prophet's theological program.

Yet Hezekiah's failure to witness these same truths to the Babylonian envoys is also important to what follows. Up to this point, it may have been thought this devout and trusting Hezekiah is the promised Immanuel (7:14). Perhaps he is the one who will be the savior of his people, and perhaps his kingdom is the one promised in chapters 9, 11, and 32–33. By placing this failure at the end of the section (ch. 39), the author-editor is not merely

pointing ahead to the coming defeat by Babylon. Much more importantly, he is saying that Hezekiah is *not* Immanuel and that we must look to someone else yet to come for the fulfillment of the messianic promises. In my view, this is the only satisfactory explanation for reversing the chronological order of Isaiah 36–37 and 38–39.²

The date of the event described in chapters 36–37 seems to be unquestionably 701 B.C., based both on Assyrian records and on those found in the Bible. But it does create one serious problem. First Kings 18:1 is explicit that Hezekiah began to reign in the third year of Hoshea of Israel, that is, about 727 B.C. But that would place his "fourteenth year" in 715, which is impossible. The solution seems to be that he was coregent with his father, Ahaz, until Ahaz's death in 716, and that the years of his reign, unlike those of other coregents, were only counted from his full accession to the throne. Thiele does not accept this suggestion and argues that there is a twelve-year discrepancy in the accounts that has not been fully harmonized.³

The Speech of the Field Commander (36:1–22)

"The field commander" (36:2) is the third highest-ranking officer in the Assyrian army, so this move against Jerusalem is a serious one. The main army is engaged in the siege of Lachish, about thirty miles southwest of Jerusalem on the edge of the coastal plain. This is the last remaining Judean walled city except Jerusalem; all the rest have fallen to the Assyrians (36:1). As long as Lachish stands firm, there is danger to the rear of any army attacking Jerusalem, for Lachish is large and can hold numerous troops. At the same time, as long as Jerusalem holds out, it poses a danger to the troops surrounding Lachish. So it is greatly to Sennacherib's advantage to persuade the leadership in Jerusalem that their situation is hopeless and that their only option is to surrender. This would save the expense and aggravation of yet another siege and would probably help to bring Lachish down.

It is significant that the field commander stands in exactly the same spot where Isaiah stood some thirty-four or thirty-five years earlier when he had confronted Ahaz (36:2; cf. 7:3). The warnings Isaiah gave over the folly of trusting Assyria instead of God are all coming true with a vengeance. He said that the Assyrians would flood the land right up to its neck (8:7–8), and

that very flood tide was now swirling around them. Ahaz had only been faced with his two northern neighbors: Israel and Syria. Hezekiah now faces a much larger and more deadly enemy. Have the lessons of Isaiah's preaching during the last thirty-five years made any difference? Will Hezekiah trust God in much more risky circumstances than those where his father did not trust?⁴

The field commander's speech is not logically developed. At one point he says that the Lord has sent them to attack Jerusalem (36:10), but in another that the Lord cannot protect Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib (36:18–20). It appears that he is simply hammering the fearful Judeans with every possible argument that might undermine their trust—and trust is clearly what this conflict is about. His opening words make that clear: "On what are you basing this confidence of yours?" (36:4). Then he proceeds to demolish, from his point of view, each possible basis. He starts with military power and says they are trusting a "splintered reed," Egypt, for their strength. That reed will break if they put any weight at all on it (36:5–6). That proved true as the Assyrian army was able to defeat the one Egyptian foray under Tirhakah handily.

The commander then turns to another possible source of help, the Lord (Isa. 36:7). Here he betrays a deficiency in his background briefing, believing that God is unhappy at the destruction of the high places outside of Jerusalem where local people were worshiping him. The pagan Assyrian cannot understand that the unity of God is undermined by worship of him in places other than Jerusalem. Furthermore, many high places were formerly pagan worship centers, so the worship of the Lord there was often diluted with paganism. It was for these kinds of reasons that God, through Moses, had commanded that he was to be worshiped only in the place he himself chose (Deut. 12:2–5). But the Assyrian cannot understand that and assumes that God is angry at this destruction and will not likely help someone like Hezekiah, who engineered the destruction.

Then the field commander turns back to military might and mocks the weakness of Judah. So powerful is Assyria that they could afford to give two thousand horses to Judah and still be confident of defeating them. But he is not worried because he knows that little Judah cannot muster two thousand trained horsemen to ride the horses even if they were given. In

that light, the help from Egypt is useless (Isa. 36:9), because Judah cannot make good use of whatever military assistance they might receive.

Then the Assyrian field commander switches gears again, asserting that "the LORD," the God of Israel, has directed him to "destroy" the "land." It would be interesting to know where this idea came from. It is certainly not what we think of as typical Assyrian thought. It may well be that the Assyrian foreign office has done its homework and discovered that these were the kinds of things the prophets of Israel were saying. Yet the field commander's brutal assertion that his master, the king, can defeat Judah's God just as he has every other god (36:18–20) makes it clear that all he really believes in is power.

It is clear from the interchange in 36:11–12 that a part of the purpose of the field commander's expedition is to erode the morale of the city. When the ambassadors of King Hezekiah ask him to continue his presentation in Aramaic, the common language of the Assyrian Empire and one that the Judean officials understand but not the common people, he flatly refuses. He feels all the Israelites should know what horrors they are going to face if their leaders are so foolish as not to surrender. Presumably the people might become so panic-stricken that the leaders will be forced to surrender even if it is against their own best judgment.

It is interesting that the Assyrian refers to his master as "the king" on several occasions (36:8, 13, 14, 16, 18) but never once accords that honor to Hezekiah. Whenever he refers to the king of Judah, it is only by his name. Here is one more part of the power play: The ruler of this petty nation does not even have the right to be called a king in any comparison with the true king of the universe, Sennacherib. How does he dare to oppose his will to that of the only true king?

The real issue comes out in 36:14–20. It is a contest between the Lord and the king of Assyria. Note that it is not a contest between the Lord and the gods of Assyria, but between the mightiest and most glorious man of the age and the Lord God. Here is the height of the human arrogance that has been attacked throughout the book thus far, and here all the teaching of the book thus far comes to its climax. Will we trust human glory, a humanity that dares to call itself "king"? Or will we trust the One who *is* Glory, the One who *is* King, and be given a message of hope for the nations?

The Assyrian officer says in the bluntest of terms that Hezekiah "cannot deliver you" (36:14), because "the LORD will [not] deliver" them (36:18–20). But before he comes to that reason, he dares to ask the Judeans to trust his master, Sennacherib. If they will entrust themselves to this master tyrant instead of to the Lord, he will lift the restraints of the siege from them and they will be able to go back out to their farms (36:16) until they are transported to just as good a place as this. One has to admire the Assyrian's capacity to put a good face on the deportation, which everyone knows will follow any surrender at this stage in Judean-Assyrian relations.

Then, in the kind of sudden reversal that is typical of hard-line inquisition, the tone changes from conciliatory to brutal. What will happen to them if they are so foolish as to believe Hezekiah's promise that "the LORD will deliver us" (36:18)? All the terrible things that they have heard have happened to every other city of consequence up and down the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. The gods of all those cities were helpless before the king of Assyria, so how can they imagine that their God is any different? Interestingly, he never comes right out to say God cannot deliver, but he says that no other god has, so how can this one?

Perhaps the field commander would arouse some competitive zeal if he were so bold as to say God cannot deliver, but if he can just let the facts speak for themselves, the people will surely be forced to the conclusion he wants them to draw. But the Assyrian's argument has a fatal flaw in it. He assumes that the Lord is just one more of the gods. But that is not true. As Isaiah has been saying all along, the Lord is not one of the gods; he is a different sort of being altogether.

The representatives of King Hezekiah make no attempt to answer this collection of arguments. That is certainly just as well, because they are not meant to answer. This is psychological warfare, an attempt to break the enemy's will to resist. And it seems to have been effective because the representatives go back to the king in a state of shock and grief, as attested by their having "torn" their clothing.

Hezekiah's Response (37:1–7)

HEZEKIAH'S RESPONSE TO his advisors' report is instructive. He also tears his clothes (37:1), puts on sackcloth or burlap (the traditional sign of mourning), and goes into the temple. He does not closet himself with his

advisors and consider what "spin" to put on the events. To be sure, if the sequence of the materials in 2 Kings also corresponds to the sequence of events, Hezekiah has already tried to buy himself out of the situation by giving Sennacherib a large sum of money, so in one sense this is a last resort. We need not make Hezekiah look better than he is. But it is hard to imagine either Jehoiakim or Zedekiah in the Babylonian crisis a hundred years later turning to God this openly or directly at any point in the process.

Not only does Hezekiah himself turn to God, he also sends an impressive delegation to consult with Isaiah (37:2). Hezekiah's message to Isaiah carries much the same tone as that found in his prayer later in chapter 37. He is particularly concerned about the disgrace that this situation brings on God. Hezekiah and at least some of his people have publicly declared their belief that God will not let them fall to the Assyrians. But now they *are* going to fall unless God intervenes in some miraculous way. The Judeans have no strength with which to bring about their own deliverance. This is the point of 37:3. Like the mother who has labored and labored to the point of exhaustion, they have no strength left (see also 26:16–18; 54:1; 66:9). But the Assyrian has not only ridiculed the Judeans for the apparent failure of their trust, he has ridiculed "the living God" himself. Rather hesitantly, Hezekiah wonders if God will let that go by (37:4).

The response God gives to Isaiah makes it clear he does not intend to let the challenge pass unaddressed. The difference from the hesitancy of Hezekiah's tone is marked. The king may be terrified, but the God who speaks through Isaiah is not. God's words are brisk and matter-of-fact. He returns a bit of his own ridicule when he refers to the high Assyrian officers as "underlings" (37:6). But he says that he has not merely been ridiculed by the Assyrian, he has been blasphemed. As a result, he will not allow the Assyrian to succeed in his plans but will send him home by means of nothing more than a "spirit." There, supposedly secure in his own fortress, Sennacherib will die by the "sword." God is not mocked.

Bridging Contexts

WE MAY THINK of an incident similar to this in our own times. In December 1944, Hitler threw his carefully hoarded reserves into the weakest part of the Allied line in the Ardennes forest of Belgium. He hoped that by a

lightning thrust northwestward to the coast at Antwerp he could divide the British and American sections of the Allied army and gain the time necessary for his secret weapons, the V–2 rockets, to soften up the British and perhaps bring the Allies to the bargaining table. The result was the so-called "Battle of the Bulge."

Initially, the Germans were successful as they punched a large hole through the Allied front lines. The terrible winter weather favored the Germans as it kept the Allied air forces grounded. However, although the front line had been broken, the second and third lines only bent backward. And in the middle of the "Bulge," surrounded by German forces, was the important crossroads town of Bastogne. As long as Bastogne was held by the Allies, it constituted a serious threat to the German supply lines. So major German forces were committed to capturing it, forces that were sorely needed in the westward push if it was to succeed.

After more than a week of hammering, during which the American forces holding the city were more and more constricted, a German representative appeared under a white flag, demanding the surrender of the city. Brigadier General Anthony McAuliffe responded to the demand with one of the tersest replies to a surrender demand in all history, "Nuts!" The German representative withdrew somewhat mystified but understanding that no surrender was forthcoming, and a few days later the city was relieved by American troops driving northward through the shoulder of the "Bulge." Hezekiah, unlike General McAuliffe, had no promises of a Patton-led Third Army coming to his rescue. He only had the Lord. But that was enough to make him give a response to the Assyrians that must have sounded a good deal like McAuliffe's.

There are some striking similarities between the field commander's attempts to break the Judeans' will to resist and that which is practiced today. One of these is the bombardment with arguments, even if some of the arguments actually contradict each other. So it did not matter that "God sent us" (36:10) and "God is no match for us" (36:18–20) could not both be true. Truth is beside the point in this kind of situation. The point is to get prisoners reeling, hitting them with another argument before they can formulate a response to the previous one. The desired result is a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness under the sheer weight of the arguments.

A second similarity is the sudden alternation between apparent kindness and brutality. The "subject" has been expending tremendous energy resisting when suddenly the pressure is relaxed, and perhaps even some kindness is shown. One experiences great relief, believing that "the worst is over." But in that moment the interrogator returns to the attack with much greater brutality than before. In many cases, the "subject," having dismantled his or her defenses, is simply unable to erect them again. The Romanian pastor Joseph Tson experienced something like this when after months of interrogation, the interrogator suddenly backed him up against a wall and, holding him by the lapels, began banging Tson's head against the wall. Pastor Tson said that he shouted at the top of his voice, wanting everyone in the building to know what was happening. But, like Hezekiah, he did not break under the pressure. He had inner resources that were superior to those of the interrogator.

The field commander's reference to the "two thousand horses" and horsemen to ride them (36:8) may well be a boast about the latest military technology. At this time the use of mounted cavalry was first being promoted alongside the use of chariotry. The cavalry were even more flexible and mobile than chariot forces, which had dominated warfare for the previous five hundred years. If it is indeed a reference to cavalry, it is probably a mocking reference to Judah's being out of touch with the latest developments. If they were going to depend on military technology to protect them from Assyria, then they had to have the latest technology, and that they clearly did not have. They had no one trained to ride the horses even if they did have them.

In today's world, dependence on technology has the same drawbacks. Is technology a tool, or is it the source of our strength? If it is the latter, then we have no choice but to commit ourselves to the latest technology even if it means abandoning a perfectly serviceable older approach. If our identity is tied to technology, then we can never afford to be one moment behind. As the Assyrians learned to their dismay, the God on whom Hezekiah trusted was not dependent on military technology, so it really did not matter whether the Judeans were up to date or not. This is not an argument that we should cultivate technological backwardness. But it is to say that if our true identity is somewhere else than in technology, then we will not need to be ruled by the latest developments in the field. In days of rapid change, this can be a real blessing, as the latest development may well be a dead-end.

Contemporary Significance

WHOLEHEARTED DEVOTION. Where is the source of strength when all the forces of the world seem ranged against us, intent on hammering us into the ground and breaking all our resistance? Perhaps for Hezekiah, this was the culmination of a whole series of choices. We do not know how carefully he had listened to Isaiah across the years, but the biblical record depicts a man who had, from the outset, tried to do what he believed God had wanted. So when he came to this crisis moment, there was a sense in which he was already fully committed. He had torn down the idol altars; he had reinstituted the kind of worship God had directed; he had gone so far as to try to reintegrate people from north Israel into worship at the Jerusalem temple. He had tried to clean up the priesthood (cf. 2 Kings 18:2–8; 2 Chron. 29:1–31:21). As he testifies in Isaiah 38:3, he had lived for God with "wholehearted devotion."

What does this mean for us? Perhaps it may be illustrated by the sequel to the story of Joseph Tson told above. Tson says that that night as he was filled with righteous indignation over what had been done to him, he felt Jesus speaking to him. Jesus said something like this, "Joseph, I thought you wanted to know me."

Tson responded, "Yes, Lord, I do!"

"Well," Jesus replied, "as my servant Paul said, that means you want to share the fellowship of my suffering. But the way you are going on, it appears to me you don't really want to know me that deeply."

The next morning, before the interrogator could open his mouth, Pastor Tson said to him, "I want to apologize to you."

The interrogator blurted, "For what?"

"For harboring resentment and hatred in my heart toward you. Last night my Jesus showed me that you are his instrument to help me to know him better through sharing the fellowship of his suffering. So please forgive me."

The interrogator mumbled something, and Tson says, "He never laid a hand on me again." I suppose the man did not want to give Jesus any help.

The point is that Tson was personally and spiritually prepared for what was going to happen to him. He had long ago decided who was going to be

the King in his life, and he had long ago decided that nothing would keep him from knowing Jesus in his fullness. Thus, when a spurious "king" presented himself, this was not a new issue to be faced. It had already been faced. Furthermore, because of a living relationship with Jesus, Tson was in a place to hear the voice of Jesus in a way that could make the incident actually creative from a spiritual standpoint. So the question for each of us must be: Is Christ the King of my life today? If he is, then adversity and persecution will not catch us off-guard and shake us.

The New Testament writers constantly counsel us in this regard. Peter says, "Do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ" (1 Peter 4:12). He also says, "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (3:15). John says to each of the seven churches that they can and must "overcome," and that if they do, eternal rewards await them. Paul advised the elders of the church at Ephesus to keep watch over themselves and the "flock," because enemies from both without and within would seek to destroy them (Acts 20:28–31). In other words, we need to expect adversity and be spiritually prepared for it when it comes.

Trusting God. There is a second important factor if we are to stand firm when we are challenged to trust other things than God. This is the truth of Psalm 46:10, which has been translated traditionally as "Be still, and know that I am God." A more colloquial translation might be, "Relax and find out that I am God." We need to be entrusting God with the small things of our lives so that when the crisis comes, it is easy for us to continue trusting him. We need to allow God to demonstrate his love and care to us on a daily basis by taking our hands off some things that we could supply for ourselves and letting God supply them in his way and in his time.

As a seminary professor I have seen my students living this way again and again. They pull into town with everything they own in a rented trailer, with no job, no place to live, nothing but the conviction that this is where God wants them. We faculty sometimes shake our heads and say, "Here is another crazy couple"; yet again and again I have seen God provide for people like that in unusual ways. When they finish their seminary career, they know that God can be trusted; they have seen him in action. The rest of

us who plan so carefully and provide for ourselves so fully have never put God to the test; he has never had to demonstrate his special trustworthiness to us. So when the day comes that we are faced with a taunting Assyrian, we may have a much greater leap of faith to trust God than the person who put himself or herself at risk for God long before. Oswald Chambers says it this way:

Trust entirely in God, and when He brings you to the venture, see that you take it. We act like pagans in a crisis, only one out of a crowd is daring enough to bank his faith in the character of God.¹¹

Another aspect of this narrative as it relates to trust has to do with the validity of the Assyrian's charge that the Judeans were trusting Egypt. Sometimes we give our opponents ammunition to use against us because we have betrayed our trust in God by trusting the world instead. In the case of Judah and Egypt, the trust was one God had prohibited, and now the Assyrian was able to mock them for doing such a foolish thing.

By all means, then, let us look at the things we are trusting and see if they are in fact a denial of our supposed faith in God. If there are any practices or relationships in our lives that will give others a chance to say that we talk a good show but are really no different from the world in the way we live, we must get rid of them now. There may also be some things that are legitimate and permissible but which will still give the impression that we do not actually trust God for our needs, and we should dispense with those too so that it will become as clear as possible where our trust really is. These kinds of decisions are personal, between us and the Lord, but the real issue for all of us is: Do I really trust the Lord for the supply of my needs, or does my behavior say that I lie?

Isaiah 37:8–38

⁸WHEN THE FIELD commander heard that the king of Assyria had left Lachish, he withdrew and found the king fighting against Libnah.

⁹Now Sennacherib received a report that Tirhakah, the Cushite king of Egypt, was marching out to fight against him. When he heard it, he sent messengers to Hezekiah with this word: ¹⁰"Say to Hezekiah king of Judah: Do not let the god you depend on deceive you when he says, 'Jerusalem will not be handed over to the king of Assyria.' ¹¹Surely you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all the countries, destroying them completely. And will you be delivered? ¹²Did the gods of the nations that were destroyed by my forefathers deliver them —the gods of Gozan, Haran, Rezeph and the people of Eden who were in Tel Assar? ¹³Where is the king of Hamath, the king of Arpad, the king of the city of Sepharvaim, or of Hena or Ivvah?"

¹⁴Hezekiah received the letter from the messengers and read it. Then he went up to the temple of the LORD and spread it out before the LORD. ¹⁵And Hezekiah prayed to the LORD: ¹⁶"O LORD Almighty, God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. ¹⁷Give ear, O LORD, and hear; open your eyes, O LORD, and see; listen to all the words Sennacherib has sent to insult the living God.

¹⁸"It is true, O LORD, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste all these peoples and their lands. ¹⁹They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they were not gods but only wood and stone, fashioned by human hands. ²⁰Now,

O LORD our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O LORD, are God."

²¹Then Isaiah son of Amoz sent a message to Hezekiah: "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: Because you have prayed to me concerning Sennacherib king of Assyria, ²²this is the word the LORD has spoken against him:

"The Virgin Daughter of Zion despises and mocks you. The Daughter of Jerusalem tosses her head as you flee. ²³Who is it you have insulted and blasphemed? Against whom have you raised your voice and lifted your eyes in pride? **Against the Holy One of Israel!** ²⁴By your messengers you have heaped insults on the Lord. And you have said, 'With my many chariots I have ascended the heights of the mountains, the utmost heights of Lebanon. I have cut down its tallest cedars, the choicest of its pines. I have reached its remotest heights, the finest of its forests. ²⁵I have dug wells in foreign lands and drunk the water there. With the soles of my feet I have dried up all the streams of Egypt.'

²⁶"Have you not heard?

Long ago I ordained it.
In days of old I planned it;
now I have brought it to pass,
that you have turned fortified cities
into piles of stone.

27Their people, drained of power, are dismayed and put to shame.
They are like plants in the field, like tender green shoots, like grass sprouting on the roof, scorched before it grows up.

28"But I know where you stay and when you come and go and how you rage against me.
29Because you rage against me and because your insolence has reached my ears,
I will put my hook in your nose and my bit in your mouth,
and I will make you return by the way you came.

³⁰"This will be the sign for you, O Hezekiah:

"This year you will eat what grows by itself, and the second year what springs from that.

But in the third year sow and reap, plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

31Once more a remnant of the house of Judah

will take root below and bear fruit above.

³²For out of Jerusalem will come a remnant,

and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors.The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

³³"Therefore this is what the LORD says concerning the king of Assyria:

"He will not enter this city or shoot an arrow here.

He will not come before it with shield or build a siege ramp against it.

34By the way that he came he will return; he will not enter this city," declares the LORD.

35"I will defend this city and save it, for my sake and for the sake of David my servant!"

³⁶Then the angel of the LORD went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning—there were all the dead bodies! ³⁷So Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew. He returned to Nineveh and stayed there.

³⁸One day, while he was worshiping in the temple of his god Nisroch, his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer cut him down with the sword, and they escaped to the land of Ararat. And Esarhaddon his son succeeded him as king.

Original Meaning

ALTHOUGH SOME SCHOLARS believe the material in 37:9–38 to be a second account of the same event narrated in 36:1–37:8, there are enough differences between the two to make that unlikely. In particular, we may

note that the challenge has moved to focus exclusively on God's ability to deliver, that Hezekiah's own commitment seems much more forthright and direct, and that the oracle from God is much more forceful and direct. Motyer has proposed that Hezekiah, encouraged by Isaiah's words recorded in 37:6–7, has moved beyond a hesitant faith and responded to the field commander's challenge with the assertion that the Lord will deliver Jerusalem (cf. 37:10). Thus Sennacherib's letter is a response to Hezekiah, and Hezekiah's prayer is indicative of his now-total reliance on God.² This seems a plausible explanation of the facts.

Hezekiah's Prayer (37:8–20)

WE DO NOT KNOW precisely where "Libnah" (37:8) was located. Two different sites have been suggested, one about six miles north of Lachish and another about ten miles north. Presumably Lachish has already fallen,³ and the Assyrian army is "mopping up" the last pockets of resistance. But it is also possible that the "rumor" (cf. 37:7) of an Egyptian attack plus continuing unrest in Babylon has made the Assyrian king cautious, and he is pulling back north to keep from having Jerusalem directly in his rear.⁴

In any case, Sennacherib does not want to relax any of the pressure on Hezekiah. Unable to spare the highest officers this time, he sends messengers with a letter directly from himself. No longer is it a question of Hezekiah's deceiving the people about God's deliverance (36:14). Now the challenge is directly to God: "Do not let the god you depend on deceive you" (37:10). The "gloves are off," and the Assyrian king flatly says that he has "destroyed" the nations of every other god, and he will destroy the nation of Judah's god as well. Once again, the contest is not between the gods of Assyria and the God of Judah. It is a contest between a man and the God of Judah. Sennacherib's fatal mistake is that he does not realize that Judah's God is not man-made, like all the rest.

Here Sennacherib deigns to call Hezekiah "king" (37:10), but it is only to associate him with the "kings" of all the previously captured cities (37:13). There is something of a personal threat here, because the Assyrians treated rebellious kings with special brutality. If Hezekiah insists on trusting his God, then he should remember what will happen to him when this God fails. He can expect something like being skinned alive, so he had better think twice before defying the mightiest man alive.

This time Hezekiah does not ask Isaiah to pray for the "remnant" (37:4); rather, he goes directly to God himself. His ascription of praise in 37:16 is a marvelous compendium of the attributes and character of God. He is the "LORD Almighty," that is, "Yahweh of heaven's armies." All the hosts of heaven are at his beck and call; he can do whatever he wishes. He is the "God of Israel," the One who has stepped into time and space to graciously create a people through whom he can save the world. He is "enthroned between the cherubim" with all that phrase connotes of both unapproachable holiness and of covenant faithfulness. He is the sole "God over all the kingdoms of the earth," a stunning statement of faith, surrounded as Judah is with polytheistic cultures. But there is a reason for such a statement, and that is Hezekiah's final ascription: God "made heaven and earth." Because he alone is the Creator, then he alone is God of the entire cosmos.

Hezekiah's petition (37:17) particularly stresses the fact that God is not an idol but is the "living God." Idols have ears, but they cannot hear; they have eyes, but they cannot see (cf. Ps. 115:4–8; 135:15–18). God has no eyes, but his "eyes" are always on his creatures; he has no ears, but his "ears" are always open to his people's cries. Hezekiah prays as Elijah did on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:36–37), with the confidence that his God not only can hear but wants to hear.

Perhaps the most striking thing about this prayer is its focus on God's vindication rather than on the deliverance of the people. Hezekiah calls on God to see the way in which Sennacherib has insulted God. The most crucial issue here is not whether the city of Jerusalem is taken. Rather, it is whether the claim will stand that Yahweh is just one more of the gods created by humans, which other humans can destroy at will. Later on the city did fall, but God's identity and character were not on the line there. Jeremiah had foretold the event, claiming God was in fact doing it (cf. Jer. 37:6–10).

But here God has said it will not happen while Sennacherib has said it will. Who is right? Hezekiah admits that what the Assyrian has said about the other kingdoms and cities and their gods is right (Isa. 37:18–19), but he insists that they are not gods at all. They are human creations, products of human skill and ingenuity. Of course, this is primarily addressing the fact of idolatry. But it is profoundly true of pagan thought itself. The entire system

is a product of human speculation on the nature of existence and, as such, is a human creation. Compared to the God of the Bible, who has broken in on us and revealed himself to be dramatically different from our speculations, those things are not even worthy to be called "gods."

Isaiah 37:20 brings the prayer to a fitting climax. Why does Hezekiah pray for the deliverance of his city? Significantly, it is not as he prayed for himself in chapter 38. He does not claim that the city deserves deliverance because of its righteousness or even because of its special place in the plan for God. One reason alone is given: "so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O LORD, are God."

In many ways this is the climax of all the teaching found in chapters 7–35. Unlike Ahaz, whose fear led him to trust the nations more than God, Hezekiah has learned the lessons taught in the intervening chapters and is willing to stake everything, including his own life, on the uniqueness of the living God. Here is trust on the highest level. Here is trust befitting a descendant of that David who was not willing for a giant to stand unmolested and "defy the armies of the living God" (1 Sam. 17:26). If Israel is to be the vehicle through which all the nations will come to know the true God (Isa. 2:1–5), then trust like this is an imperative. Israel must allow itself to be put in a place where the uniqueness and sole saviorhood of God can be seen. In the crisis Hezekiah comes through with flying colors.

God's Response to Hezekiah's Prayer (37:21–38)

God's response to this prayer comes through Isaiah and is recorded in 37:21–35. It appears in three parts, the first of which is addressed directly to Sennacherib (37:22–29). The second is addressed to Hezekiah (37:30–32), and the third is spoken of Sennacherib (37:33–35). If the message of the field commander betrayed a certain familiarity with Judean life and thought, this oracle shows remarkable familiarity with the Assyrian royal annals. Especially verses 24–25, which quote the boasts of Sennacherib, sound much like what appears in those annals. Possibly there were publicists with the Assyrian armies who circulated these kinds of poetic celebrations of Assyrian might. If so, Isaiah has picked up on them and uses them to show how foolish they are in the light of the reality of the living God.

The opening phrase "the Virgin Daughter of Zion" (37:22) suggests that the Assyrian attack on Jerusalem is comparable to a dominant male seeking to rape a beautiful young girl. On the surface, there is nothing to keep him from carrying out his will. But Assyria, the would-be rapist, has not taken into account "the Holy One of Israel" (37:23). Or rather, he has dismissed the "LORD" as being of no account. He has put himself on the level of God, lifting his "eyes in pride" and in the process blaspheming God by bringing him down to Sennacherib's own level. Once more we encounter the theme of the folly of self-exaltation on the part of the creature (cf. 2:6–22; 14:4–22; etc.). There is only One who is "high and lifted up." For anyone else to presume to that position is to invite destruction. As a result, the "Daughter of Jerusalem" will be able to toss "her head" in mockery at the mighty man as he runs away in ignominy.

Verses 24–25 seem to extol Sennacherib by reference to extremes. Verse 24 speaks of the "heights" he has scaled in the north ("Lebanon"), while verse 25 speaks of the deep "wells" he has "dug" in the south ("Egypt"). Surely this man is the master of the world, from north to south and from heights to depths. He can fell the tallest trees and stop up the mightiest rivers. Nothing can stop him.

But what he does not know is that all of this has been "long ago planned" by the God of one of the little countries the Assyrian has so contemptuously trampled on (37:26). This theme of the plan of God in relation to Assyria has been encountered at least twice before (10:6, 15; 14:24–27). Not only is this not a contest between what the God of Israel wants and what Assyria wants, but the Assyrian is not even on the stage by his own volition. He is a puppet being moved by Israel's God! God has "brought it to pass" that Assyria has conquered the "fortified cities" and reduced their inhabitants to wilted, "scorched" "plants" (37:27). As a result, Sennacherib cannot hide from God. Just as God has brought him on the stage, he can take him off again (37:28–29). To God, the mighty Assyrian monarch is no more than a bull with a ring in his nose⁷ or a horse with a "bit" in his mouth.

Verses 30–32 constitute a sign to Hezekiah that this is indeed a word from God. Like several of the other signs in the book (7:14; 8:3; 16:14), it is forward-looking. It does not create faith, but it promotes it in that God has gone on record that he will do what he says and has given a means for checking the veracity of what he has said. Probably the "three years" is not

three full years from the date of the prophecy but parts of three different calendar years. One possibility is that the Assyrians will retreat in the fall of "this year" when it is too late for planting to take place. Thus, though the Assyrians will be gone in the next, or "second" year, the only food plants growing will be those that come up on their own. Finally, planting can take place in the fall of that "second" year, so that there will be plenty of food to be harvested in the "third" year.8

But in God's mind, the more important point is that he will preserve a harvest for himself from among his people (37:32). The Assyrian thought to devastate God's "field" and take all the crop for himself. But although God has permitted a large measure of devastation to take place, he will not allow total destruction to occur. He has too great a passion ("zeal") for his people to allow that to happen. He will preserve a "remnant" for himself.

All God's promises are summed up in 37:33–35, where Isaiah makes two assertions about what will happen—one negative (v. 33) and one positive (v. 34)—and then gives a supporting reason for these assertions (v. 35). The negative assertion is that the Assyrian will not mount any kind of an attack against the city. Not only will they not conquer God's city, they will not even "shoot an arrow" there. On the surface of it, this is amazing. Hezekiah is the leader of the revolt; to leave him unpunished would send a bad message, from an Assyrian point of view, to all the other potential rebels in the area. But not only will the Assyrians not mount a siege against the city, they will leave the area completely (37:34). The reason given for this amazing turn of events is that God "will defend" the city "and save it." Sennacherib has said he will destroy the city, whereas God has said he will save it. Now we will see who is right.

Verses 36–38 are stunning in their terse, matter-of-fact reporting. They are so plain and unadorned as to be almost anticlimactic. Perhaps the point is to show that there is simply no contest here. This is not some earth-shaking conflict between evenly matched contestants. This is definitely a "no contest" match. God simply sends the angel of death. Nor is the angel finished on the Philistine plains. Just because Sennacherib is at home in what should have been the safest place on earth for him ("the temple of his god"), God's word is still true (37:7), and his rule is still effective. His own sons "cut him down" (37:38) and flee. Despite all his boasts, Sennacherib cannot stand against the living God. Hezekiah has proved that it is foolish

to trust the nations in place of the living God, "the Holy One of Israel" (37:23).¹²

Bridging Contexts

THE PAGAN VIEW OF REALITY. At the heart of this material is the conflict between the biblical view of reality and the pagan view. Yehezkel Kaufmann has shown that the pagan view of reality was rooted in the idea that the gods emerged from matter, were identical with its various forms, and were conditioned by it. Thus, they "correspond" with the natural realm and are indeed continuous with it.¹³ The thought that the gods might have come into existence before matter is simply unthinkable. Matter, existing in chaotic form, has always existed and always will, and the gods are the result of tensions in this stuff. Whether you call it "Yin" and "Yang," or "Good" and "Evil," or "Positive" and "Negative," the point is the same.

Thus, the gods have no real freedom. They play the role assigned to them by their "fate." The sun god cannot shine in the night; the moon goddess cannot shine in the day. Furthermore, the gods have no purpose when they "create"—or perhaps more precisely, when they "procreate." They are to be understood by analogy with the world of nature, and just as nature is without purpose as it produces life, so are the gods without purpose. Since there is no purpose, there is no goal toward which they are moving. Life came from nowhere and goes nowhere.

This continuity with nature necessarily issues in idolatry. If the gods have emerged from matter and are conditioned by it, what could be more sensible than to represent them in material forms? Furthermore, the understanding of the correspondence between the gods and matter means that by manipulating the idol, I can manipulate the god and in so doing manipulate the natural force behind the god.

Kaufmann notes that the biblical writers never seem to pay attention to the deity behind the idol and argues forcefully how this shows a complete ignorance of the thought world of myth in the Bible. However, it seems to me that he has made too much of this evidence. To think that the Israelites were so isolated from the surrounding cultures that they did not even understand how those cultures thought is to ask far too much. To think that Elijah and Elisha did not understand how the Baal religion functioned

presupposes an almost unbelievable obtuseness. Furthermore, when the Israelites fell into the worship of idols, it is unimaginable that they did not do so for the same reasons their pagan neighbors did: the attempt to manipulate the forces of nature with which the idols corresponded.

No, the reason the biblical prophets concentrate on the folly of making idols (see comments on 40:18–20; 42:17; 44:9–20) is that this is the Achilles heel of paganism. Rather than go into a complex (and abstract) argument on the nature of transcendence and continuity, they simply ask how a piece of stone or a block of wood can save us. Even though this argument seems simple, it has profound implications, for behind it is the much larger question: How can the natural system save us from the natural system? How can what manifestly has no purpose infuse our life with purpose? How can what is obviously without meaning give us meaning? Such things do not merit the title of "gods." Thus, idolatry is the symptom, but by addressing the symptom, the biblical writers are necessarily getting us to focus on the disease.

Today, the disease is all around us, and the symptoms are beginning to reemerge. Many of the most intelligent among us insist on the eternity of matter. "Spirit" is only a by-product of electrochemical forces inherent in that matter, forces they might describe as "positive" and "negative." They insist that all life is evolving but admit that they do not know why nor to what end. But there is also emerging a sense that there is more to reality than merely electrochemical forces, that we need to somehow "personalize" these forces. No longer is cold, impersonal reason a satisfactory basis for life. So we face the reemergence of the same conflict with which Hezekiah was faced. We must again ask whether the living God is any different from, or superior to, what this world calls "gods."

Human boasting. The Assyrian kings did not suffer from false humility. In a report to his god Ashur, Sargon II (724–705 B.C.) said the following words that sound a good deal like those Isaiah quoted:

I put the armies of Shamash and Marduk across the Lower Zab, whose passage is difficult like a canal. I entered through the passes of Kullar, the high mountain of the land of Lulumi which they call Zamua. I passed through the midst of Nikipa and Upa, high mountains,

which are covered with all kinds of trees, whose midst is chaos, whose passes are fearful, whose shade spreads over that region like a cedar forest so that one who goes through them does not see the ray of Shamash. I crossed over the Buya, a river between them, 26 times. My army in its mass did not fear the high waters.¹⁵

But when we think of the posturing in the ring by members of the World Wrestling Entertainment, these words sound almost modest. We may smirk and comment that the wrestlers, like their performances, are just so much air, a make-believe world for consumption by the gullible. But before we dismiss the spectacle too easily, we must remember that people pay large ticket prices to see these performances. This suggests that people in some way enjoy such posturing. It may suggest there is something we actually admire in it, and perhaps we secretly wish we could get away with such blatant self-promotion.

Contemporary Significance

HUMILITY. The Bible again and again speaks of God's preference for the lowly. Isaiah says in 57:15:

For this is what the high and lofty One says—
he who lives forever, whose name is holy:
"I live in a high and holy place,
but also with him who is contrite and lowly in Spirit."

Jesus says, quoting the Old Testament, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Matt. 5:5). He says of himself, "I am gentle and humble in heart" (11:29). Peter follows up on this with the words: "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (1 Peter 5:6). Yet, we see that the "winners" in this world, like Sennacherib, are often masters at self-promotion and intimidation. A bestselling book of a few years ago was entitled *Winning Through Intimidation*, and many people learned to practice its techniques. Is the Bible hopelessly out of touch? Or is it the kind of thing we are expected to

give a nod of approval to while admitting that it is not practical in "the real world"?

Everything depends on whether we have really met God or not. For Sennacherib and the World Wrestling Entertainment performers, their lives and their futures are in their own hands. Their success depends completely on themselves. So the adage runs, "If you don't blow your own horn, nobody else will." The same will be true for all of us. We may try to find ways that are a little more socially acceptable than the braggadocio of the WWE, yet in the end we must carefully cultivate our own reputation and put ourselves forward. It is a matter of "self-respect," we are told. It is a person with "no backbone" who lets oneself be walked on by others.

To be sure, there are persons who feel themselves to be worthless, who feel that they do not get any "breaks" because they don't deserve any. There are also those who try to win our sympathy with a "false modesty." They are constantly putting themselves down in such a way that we are forced to focus our attention on them as we try to assure them they are much more deserving and capable than they say. Neither of these are what the Bible has in mind with its teachings on humility. Hezekiah's responses are instructive. He does not bandy words with the oppressor. His first instructions to his representatives is that they are to keep silent (Isa. 37:21). He is not going to get into a shouting match. He is not going to try to say that he is better or that what they say about themselves is untrue. He refuses to play the game of one-upmanship.

Then he takes his concerns to the Lord. He has put his reputation in the hands of God. This is the key. A person who responds to the love of God knows a number of things, according to 1 John 5. We know how much we are worth: the life of the Son of God (5:11–12). We know that pulsating in us is eternal life (5:13). We know that we have instant access to the throne room of our Father (5:14–15). We know that we can live lives like God (5:18). We know that we are in a life-and-death battle with the powers presently ruling this world (5:19). We know that Jesus has given us the power to understand the issues in the battle and to remain true (5:20).

The person who knows all these things does not have to brag and pose. But neither does he or she have to go through life with a "hang-dog" expression. We are infinitely valuable to God, and our future, both near-term and long-term, is secure in God's hands. If he is who he says he is,

then we do not have to worry about our "image." Instead, we can concentrate on reality: "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13).

Paul defines this kind of attitude as "maturity." And surely this is maturity: having a correct estimate of your abilities and your liabilities, one that is not dependent on the opinions of others, and being secure in who you are and who you are becoming. But this is not really possible without the perspective of heaven. When we get ourselves "off our hands" and into God's hands, we no longer need to worry about how we are looking. Now it is God's reputation that matters to us, and we are freed from that debilitating self-concern that will otherwise eat us up. That is the picture we see in Hezekiah's prayer. Here is a man whose personal success and survival are no longer paramount. This is a free man.

Prayer versus ritual manipulation. Pagan ways of thinking have an insidious way of slipping into our practices without our being aware of it. Perhaps this is so because even in our highest spiritual achievements, we remain the fallen children of Adam and Eve. I do not want to suggest that economic theory is inherently evil, but there is something slightly perverse about our constant wish to get the greatest return for the smallest outlay. We do not easily or naturally ask, "Where can I make the greatest contribution?" Instead it is, "Where can I get the biggest return with the least input from me?"

This is what drives the gambling instinct, and this is what drives pagan thought. Pagan thought says, "I know what my needs are, and I must find the means to supply those needs at the least cost to myself." Biblical thought says, "Your transcendent Creator-Father knows what your needs are and wants to supply them out of his bounty. In order to receive that supply, give yourself away to him without reservation." Our answer is the same as Adam and Eve's, and as the man who was given one talent said (Matt. 25:25): "We're afraid of you." The price God asks seems too high. Maybe he will take our all and give nothing back. So the pagan option looks good. We will find ways to manipulate God and make him give us what we want/need while keeping ourselves for ourselves.

When we begin to do this, much of our religious life begins to change its complexion. We go to church, we read the Bible, we tithe, we pray, we reject sin—all as a means of manipulating God. Slowly but surely these

behaviors begin to take on the shape of idolatry. The physical acts become the spiritual reality. Current bestsellers on prayer have this real potential. We are encouraged to repeat a specific biblical prayer over and over, using the precise words of the biblical text, with the promise that in so doing we will receive the blessings of God. It may not be the intention of the authors of these books, but quickly humans see such a prayer as a mechanical device whose purpose is to get the maximum out of God with the minimum of an investment of themselves.

The Hebrew prophets destroy such an idea. Again and again they weigh in against it. Isaiah has already done so in the first chapter and will do so again in Isaiah 58. Unlike pagan religious activity, biblical rites have no efficacy in and of themselves. They are symbols of interpersonal relationships between God and the worshiper. Jesus makes this point when he says we are not to pray like pagans who believe that they will be heard because they repeat a rote formula (Matt. 6:7).

Another illustration can be found in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. One man's prayer was heard and the other's was not, and the hearing and not hearing were dependent on the attitude of the person's heart (Luke 18:14–19). One of the reasons the prophets so often call for activity on behalf of the poor as the sign of true religion is because it is hard to turn this into a manipulative activity. It requires too much investment with too little evident return.

Hezekiah's prayer is a wonderful antidote to pagan prayer. He is far from trying to manipulate God. He does not suggest that God owes him or his people anything. He focuses on God's character and nature. Neither does he promise to do anything for God if God delivers them. He is concerned that God be known properly in the world and wants for that to happen in the context of the oppressor's boast, for that is the level on which this conflict has been pitched. Hezekiah places himself and his people in the position of simple trust. He cannot make God bless them and does not try. Rather, he commits himself to God without any qualifications or caveats.

We, too, can pray and live in this way. We can give ourselves to God absolutely and without limit. As we continue in the Christian life, we will discover ever deeper levels where that earlier surrender will have to be actualized, but that does not diminish the reality or the completeness of that first moment of total, unreserved trust. In such a relationship, we can

surrender our needs to God. To be sure, he invites us to tell him what we think our needs are because our trust is deepened as we see God providing the very things we asked for. But that does not mean that we demand he work for us. It means we lay our supposed needs at his feet for him to supply as he sees best. This kind of prayer is no longer an exercise in manipulation. Now it is a conversation between a trusting child and a loving Father.

The God of history. The Bible makes human historical experience the arena in which God is revealed. This is startlingly different from the pagan understanding. While pagans believed their gods acted in history on behalf of their favorites, they had no concept of an overarching plan or purpose, nor did they believe anything of the gods' natures could be learned from such experience. It was in the recurring cycles of nature that the gods were truly seen. Thus, the idea of keeping a record of God's activities in human history and his inspired interpretations of the meaning of those activities is something unique to the Bible.

In a real sense, then, God was revealing himself by incarnation long before Jesus Christ was born. Jesus was the culmination of what God had been doing from the outset. The Hebrews are able to say to us, "We know God and commend him to you because we have seen him at work in the context of our experience." Some writers would say that God was no more at work in Israelite history than he was in Canaanite history but that the Israelites just chose the vehicle of human history to express their faith.¹⁷ This is not the place for a lengthy discussion on the subject; suffice it to say here that unless the Hebrews had continuing and convincing evidence that God was doing this, there is no satisfactory explanation as to why they chose this mode of expression. None of their more sophisticated and thoughtful neighbors did such a thing.

Thus, it continues to be of critical significance whether the historical claims the biblical writers make are correct. If they are not, then there is every reason to abandon the strange faith of the Bible. It flies directly in the face of the way in which reality has been otherwise viewed around the world, and if it is only the bizarre creation of the Israelites, we ought to, as Paul says, give it up. However, if the biblical writers' testimony is not their own creation but an honest report of what actually happened, then regardless of the popular view or even the majority view, their religious

conclusions are inescapable, and we must, like the Christians in the Colosseum, stand on them.

Isaiah 38:1-22

IN THOSE DAYS Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, "This is what the LORD says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover."

²Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, ³"Remember, O LORD, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes." And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

⁴Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah: ⁵"Go and tell Hezekiah, 'This is what the LORD, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life. ⁶And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria. I will defend this city.

7"This is the LORD's sign to you that the LORD will do what he has promised: ⁸I will make the shadow cast by the sun go back the ten steps it has gone down on the stairway of Ahaz." So the sunlight went back the ten steps it had gone down.

⁹A writing of Hezekiah king of Judah after his illness and recovery:

¹⁰I said, "In the prime of my life must I go through the gates of death and be robbed of the rest of my years?"

¹¹I said, "I will not again see the LORD, the LORD, in the land of the living; no longer will I look on mankind,

or be with those who now dwell in this world.

12Like a shepherd's tent my house has been pulled down and taken from me.

Like a weaver I have rolled up my life, and he has cut me off from the loom; day and night you made an end of me.

¹³I waited patiently till dawn, but like a lion he broke all my bones; day and night you made an end of me.

¹⁴I cried like a swift or thrush, I moaned like a mourning dove.

My eyes grew weak as I looked to the heavens.

I am troubled; O Lord, come to my aid!"

¹⁵But what can I say?

He has spoken to me, and he himself has done this.

I will walk humbly all my years because of this anguish of my soul.

¹⁶Lord, by such things men live; and my spirit finds life in them too.

You restored me to health and let me live.

¹⁷Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish.

In your love you kept me from the pit of destruction; you have put all my sins behind your back.

¹⁸For the grave cannot praise you, death cannot sing your praise; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for your faithfulness.

¹⁹The living, the living—they praise you, as I am doing today; fathers tell their children about your faithfulness.

20 The LORD will save me,
and we will sing with stringed
instruments
all the days of our lives
in the temple of the LORD.

²¹Isaiah had said, "Prepare a poultice of figs and apply it to the boil, and he will recover."
 ²²Hezekiah had asked, "What will be the sign that I will go up to the temple of the LORD?"

Original Meaning

I have argued that chapters 36–39 stand in relation to chapters 7–12 as a kind of a mirror image. Chapters 7–12 show the consequences of Ahaz's refusal to trust God and his trusting the nations (in particular, Assyria) instead. The result was near destruction at the hands of the very nation he trusted. But the chapters conclude on a hopeful note, because God will not break his promise either to his people or to the house of David. He will send a Davidic Messiah to restore his people and rule them in peace and justice. Chapters 36–37 reverse the picture. Isaiah's prophecy has come true, and Judah has been devastated by Assyria. But Hezekiah, Ahaz's son, does put his trust in God and does not surrender to Assyria. As a result God proves his trustworthiness by keeping his word and delivering Judah from Sennacherib.

But the mirror image effect continues. Whereas chapters 7–12 began badly and ended well, chapters 36–39 begin well and end badly. Chapters 38–39, which are closely connected, depict a Hezekiah who is both mortal and fallible. This segment ends with the prediction of the Exile under Babylon, with Hezekiah's descendants in the Davidic dynasty serving the Babylonian king as eunuchs. What is going on? This question is intensified when we realize that the events in at least chapter 38 took place before the

deliverance in 701 B.C. In other words, they have been pulled out of chronological order for some reason. What could the reason be?

Since the Scripture does not answer the question explicitly, any answer we give must be tentative. Many commentators have suggested that the materials have been pulled out of chronological order in order to put the prediction of the Babylonian exile at the end of the segment and thus to provide a transition from the Assyrian section of the book to the Babylonian one. That is probably correct, but I suggest a more complex reason for changing the order. Not only does it provide a chronological transition, but it also provides a theological one. Who is this promised Davidic Messiah? Is it not Hezekiah? He is the one whose faithfulness has secured continued life for the nation. He is the one who has manifested the kind of spirit that makes true leadership possible. We also know from Kings and Chronicles that he restored both justice and religious faithfulness in the land during his reign. Surely this is the child of chapter 9, the root from the stump of Jesse in chapter 11, the man on the throne in chapter 16, and the righteous, beautiful king in chapters 32–33.

Chapters 38–39 tell us this is not the case. However good a man Hezekiah may have been, he is just that, a man. Even if he receives extended life (ch. 38), death is still his fate, as the focus of the psalm in 38:9–20 emphasizes. He is not the one who can usher in an eternal kingdom. Nor is he the almighty God (9:6). His behavior, however commendable, is not infallible (39:1–8). Instead of using the opportunity to glorify the God who had delivered him from death, Hezekiah tries to impress the Babylonian envoys with his wealth and armaments. Trust is a way of life, not an affair of the moment. So these chapters not only prepare us for the coming Babylonian exile, they also prepare us for a further revelation of the nature and character of the promised Messiah. If it is not Hezekiah, then who is it? Chapters 40–66 address this question, and chapters 38–39 prepare the reader for it.

Hezekiah's Prayer (38:1–8)

SEITZ POINTS OUT that chapter 38 reverses the flow of chapters 36–37. There the story of the one who mocked God goes from life to death. Here the story of the one who trusts God goes from death to life. The reason for this is prayer. Although Hezekiah's prayer in 38:3 is not as lofty and unselfish

as that in chapter 37, it is still a model of the direction the trusting heart takes in the time of crisis. God's word from Isaiah is unequivocal: Hezekiah is "going to die." This is not a word of judgment; it is simply a fact. But the king does not accept the announcement passively. He knows something of the heart of God, that he does hear and listen (cf. 38:5) to the cries of his people even if all the signs point to a fixed outcome. Thus, he turns to God. As far as the evidence indicates, this kind of personal dependence expressed through communication with God is foreign to Ahaz, but it seems entirely natural for Hezekiah.

It is interesting that Hezekiah does not actually ask for lengthened life. What he does is simply remind God that he has conducted his life ("walked before you") with faithfulness (lit., "truth") and "wholehearted devotion" (lit., "a perfect heart"). This is reminiscent of God's command to Abraham in Genesis 17:1: "Walk before me and be blameless [lit., perfect]." In short, Hezekiah, who was only thirty-nine years old at the time, is saying to God that he has met God's requirements for long life (cf. Ps. 34:11–14) and is asking by implication if it is fair to cut his life short as though he were a wicked man (cf. Ps. 37:35–36).

God responds to this argument and sends Isaiah back with a different word, one of fifteen additional years.² He also promises to "deliver you and this city" from the Assyrians. This may indicate that the event occurred during Sennacherib's attack on the land. Of course, that threat had been inescapable from the time that Samaria fell in 721 B.C., so the historical setting of the words may have been as early as 710, the first time Merodach-Baladan (cf. Isa. 39:1) was active. At any rate, the point is made again: Trust God and not the nations; he can deliver.³

Like his father before him, Hezekiah is offered a sign to confirm God's gracious promise of deliverance. Ahaz refused the sign because he had already made arrangements to take care of himself. Hezekiah has no such encumbrance, so he is happy to receive whatever evidence God cares to give. Perhaps this particular sign, with the sun's shadow moving back up the steps, is chosen to signify that just as God can move time backward, so he could add days to our lives.⁴

THESE VERSES ARE often referred to as Hezekiah's psalm of thanksgiving for his deliverance from death. However, the meter of the Hebrew lines is that of a lament, and several of the other features of a lament, though not all, are present. Only 38:16, 17, and 19 sound notes of thanks and praise.

In fact, the psalm seems to be largely a meditation on mortality. In 38:10–14 Hezekiah speaks of the untimeliness of the announced death. In "the prime of my life" (v. 10) relates well to his situation, as does "robbed of the rest of my years." It is particularly fellowship with God and with other humans "in the land of the living" that he hates to lose (v. 11). But at its best, life is transient, and Hezekiah uses two different figures of speech to express this transience: a "shepherd's tent" and cloth on the "loom" (v. 12). The tent is never very long in one place as the shepherd keeps moving to follow the flock. And although a cloth seems permanently attached to the loom, there must inevitably come a day when it is "cut" loose. Life is just as impermanent.

In both verses 12 and 13, Hezekiah repeats the phrase "day and night you made an end of me." This emphasizes that our lives are always in God's hands, but it also emphasizes the inevitability of death at God's hands. There was no place to get away from God, either in light or dark. Hezekiah thought he would feel better when day came (38:13), but there was no release. But just as death is from the Lord, so is life. If there is to be any hope, it is from "the heavens"; if any "aid," it is from the Lord (38:14).

It is unclear whether 38:15 is to be taken negatively or positively.⁵ If it does begin with an expression of thanks, it has a muted tone. The point seems to be that all of "this," both the disease and its subsequent removal, is the work of God and not of Hezekiah. What lesson should Hezekiah draw? He should certainly not stride through life in arrogance as though his life were his own. He has come through great "anguish of soul" and has been delivered, so he should live with that awareness, both in gratitude and with a sense of responsibility.

Verse 16 continues to be somewhat ambiguous because the referent of "such things" (Heb. "them") is unclear. Probably it denotes both the devastating illness and the gracious deliverance. Hezekiah determines to rest his "life" in the awareness that each new day is a gift from God. He believes that the "anguish" he went through has been beneficial (38:17). Perhaps one benefit is a new realization of God's "love" and mercy. Despite

his profession in 38:3 that he has been completely loyal to God, the king is aware that if God were to treat him in complete justice, his "sins" would merit nothing but death (cf. Ps. 130:3).

Verses 18–19 express the idea that it is to God's benefit to keep the faithful alive since those in the "grave" (Heb. *\vec{s}e'ol*, the underworld) "cannot praise" God for his "faithfulness." Rather, it is "the living" who praise God and who pass along their testimony of his faithfulness to their children (38:19). These ideas seem to be in line with those found in the Psalms. The idea of a blissful afterlife with God is not yet developed in Old Testament thought. This made death especially fearful in that time.

Verse 20 moves to an unambiguous note of praise. It fits the "vow of praise" with which the lament form typically closes. The speaker is confident of God's deliverance even before it has taken place or before it has been completed. Here Hezekiah, in ways that fit in with what we know of his work with the Levitical singers (2 Chron. 29:25–26), promises that as long as he is alive, there will be joyful music to the saving God in his "temple."

Additional Notes (38:21–22)

In MY JUDGMENT these last two verses were not part of the original in Isaiah. They do not fit with each other, and they appear to be out of context. This is especially clear when we look at the parallel account in 2 Kings 20, where they are integrated into the flow of the narrative. I propose that the Isaiah account and the Kings account were both dependent on a common source and that the original Isaiah did not include these details, perhaps in order to highlight the psalm. But a later editor, comparing the two accounts, thought that the details had been unintentionally left out and added them on at the end, not wanting to disturb the flow of the original.⁷

Verse 20 shows us that healing is from the Lord even if some intervening means is used to promote the healing. Verse 21 may explain why the sign involved the "stairway of Ahaz" in 38:8. As the sun moved up and down that stairway, so Hezekiah would once again move up and down the stairs of the "temple."

Bridging Contexts

ILLNESS AND SIN. Hezekiah's reference to God's having put all Hezekiah's sins behind his back (38:17) brings us to a common issue when we deal with illness. Frequently when we are ill, we wonder what we have done to deserve this. This question is intensified when we discover people in the Bible who became ill as a result of sin. Note, for example, Gehazi, the servant of Elisha. When Elisha refused the lavish gifts of the Syrian general Naaman, Gehazi thought that he would get them for himself. So he followed the Syrian entourage and told them that his master had changed his mind. As a result Gehazi contracted leprosy (2 Kings 5:16–27). A similar thing happened to King Uzziah when he insisted on burning incense in the temple (2 Chron. 26:16–20).

At the same time, the classic story of suffering in the Bible is that of Job, where it is clear that his suffering had nothing to do with sin. Jesus made the same point when he was questioned about whose sin made a certain man blind. He replied that there was no sin involved, but that the man was blind so that God could be glorified (John 9:2). These accounts tell us that while sin may be involved in certain illnesses, that is not always the case. The causes of illness are much more complex than we can ever discover.

The more significant issue is the one of deserving. Neither Job nor the blind man "deserved" their illness. Neither did Hezekiah, as God's response to his prayer seems to indicate. So illness should be a stimulus to self-examination, and if we can find no disobedience to God, it should be an opportunity for deepening our trust in him and our dependence on him for resources to triumph through the illness.

Afterlife. It is troubling to some to discover that the Old Testament has no clear picture of the afterlife. The Hebrews apparently thought of the realm of death (Sheol) as a shadowy place where disembodied spirits lived a rather joyless life (cf. Isa. 14:9–11). This is troublesome because it would seem that if the doctrine of heaven is true, it ought to appear in all parts of the Scripture. But such an idea fails to take into account the nature of Scripture. The Bible is not a heavenly product dropped onto the earth. The Muslims look at the Quran in much that way, but that is not how we got the Bible. The Bible is the result of God's interactions with specific people in specific times and places. This means that he accommodated himself to the understanding and development of those people.

It also means there is a progressive quality to God's revelation. An example is the deity of the Messiah. Before God could reveal that truth, he had first of all to demolish the idea of many gods. That task required virtually the entire Old Testament era. Only after the oneness of God had been fixed in the people's minds was it possible to begin to reveal the plurality that exists in the one God.

The same thing was true with regard to the afterlife. In the pagan view the physical world is not the real world. It is a dim reflection of the invisible world, where reality exists and where everything that happens here is determined. It took great effort on the part of God to demonstrate to people steeped in those ideas that they were wrong. This *is* a real world, and we have the freedom here to make real choices that have ultimate significance. We can participate here in the life of God in such a way that our behavior here is forever changed. Until this concept was firmly placed in the people's minds, any talk of a blissful afterlife would be dangerous. But once the reality of this world was implanted, then the truth that there are further dimensions to reality could be revealed.

Contemporary Significance

God's sovereign will. One issue guaranteed to provoke vigorous discussion among believers is the idea that God can change his mind. It is usually asserted that such a thing is impossible. After all, it will be said, God knows everything and he is perfect, so it is impossible for him to change his mind. Often a verse like 1 Samuel 15:29 is quoted: "He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind."

But we must make an important distinction here. God does not change his mind concerning the basic nature of things. He does not condemn adultery one day and commend it the next. Just because his favorite David committed adultery did not mean that it was acceptable behavior. Furthermore, God's basic purposes with humanity are not changeable. He intends to share his presence with us, and to do that he intends to remake us into his own character and likeness. So he would not change his mind concerning the judgment he pronounced on Saul. Through the series of events related in 1 Samuel 13–15, we see a Saul more and more fixated on

himself and his success until there no longer remained the possibility of God's using him.

But this unchanging commitment to do good to people means that God will gladly change what he has said about us if it can become a greater means to our blessing. Jonah knew that when he was sent to Nineveh (Jonah 4:1–3). This is the situation here as well. In the normal course of events Hezekiah contracts a disease that will mean the end of his life. But Hezekiah calls out to God, and God sees that his intervention will be a means of greater blessing for both Hezekiah and his people. Did God know that before? Of course he did. But the issue is whether Hezekiah will turn to God in faith at such a moment. If he will not, then there is little God can do for him and through him.

The "openness of God" debate at the present time seems to me to try to solve this problem with an excessive use of human logic. One kind of logic says that if God knows everything in advance, then human freedom is an illusion. All our choices are conditioned, and while we may think we are free to choose, we are not. The problem with this is that the Bible depicts people who have real choices to make and who experience the just consequences of those choices. Thus, another kind of logic is brought into play. If humans are really to be free, then God's foreknowledge must be limited.

If the first kind of logic makes God a puppet master, then this second kind of logic makes him helpless. Furthermore, it flies in the face of what Scripture, especially Isaiah, teaches us about God. The special proof that God is God alone is that he alone can tell the future (cf. Isa. 43:8–13; 48:5–8). The simple fact is that the Bible teaches both that God is sovereign and that humans have the capacity to make real choices. Any attempt on our part to reduce these teachings to simple logic will inevitably do harm to one or the other element. We must simply assert the truth of each and live in faithfulness to what the Scripture teaches. Like Hezekiah, we need to bring our petitions to God with intensity and conviction, confident that he will be consistent with his own nature and that he will always work for our best.

A perfect heart. Hezekiah's claim that he lived a life of "truth" (NIV "faithfully") with a "perfect heart" (NIV "wholehearted devotion") is rather off-putting to modern ears. We have become suspicious of extravagant

claims to righteousness—and that is as it should be. All of Jesus' teachings are critical of those who are proud of the righteousness they have achieved.

But there is a sense in which we have swung too far in the opposite direction. As we listen to popular Christian music, we rarely hear someone singing of the joys of living in unbroken fellowship with God. Instead, we hear constant confessions of recurring sin and brokenness and of God's continuing forgiveness. It is as though we have absolutized Romans 7, forgetting that it is encased in Romans 6 and 8.

We have also forgotten that Jesus told his disciples that their righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees (Matt. 5:20). The fact is that the Pharisees were not too righteous; rather, they were not righteous enough. They believed that the righteousness they had achieved, an external righteousness, was enough. God, however, wants an internal obedience that expresses itself in external behavior (cf. Jer. 31:33), something that in the end is only possible through his grace. This is what Moses called for when he said that we should love the Lord "with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:4).

So what is Hezekiah saying, and how does that translate for today? First, he is not claiming infallibility, nor is he claiming perfect performance. His mention of God's putting his sins away (Isa. 38:17) is evidence enough of that. But he is saying that on the conscious, intentional level, he has kept his promises to God. This is the meaning of "walking in truth." Hezekiah has not willingly deceived God or others. He has been careful about what he promised and has found the grace in God to keep his promises. How has this been possible? The answer is that his "heart" belongs wholly to God. The Hebrew concept of the "heart" is of the "control panel" of the life, where thought, affection, and will come together. The Hebrews do not separate these three aspects of human personality, as if they each function independently of each other. Hezekiah is saying that as far as it is up to him, his "heart" has been focused on one thing only: serving, pleasing, and obeying God.⁸

If such a life was possible for an Old Testament believer, it is certainly possible for us, who now have the Holy Spirit within us (Rom. 8:12–14; Gal. 5:16–18). This does not mean we will always do everything right or that we will never have to ask forgiveness. It is instructive to note that Asa had such a heart (NIV his "heart was fully committed to the LORD"), but he

did not remove the shrines ("high places") outside Jerusalem where Yahweh was worshiped (1 Kings 15:14). Evidently, his failure to do this was out of ignorance and not out of defiance. So his performance was flawed, but his heart was wholly God's. The tragedy of Solomon's life is that in the end his heart became divided and was no longer given over completely to God (1 Kings 11:4).

Every believer today should aspire to have the same testimony on our deathbed that Hezekiah had. To be sure, we live in an increasingly fractured and corrupt society, where it is not as easy to be faithful and to have undivided hearts as it may have been for some of our ancestors. But if ever there was a fractured and corrupt society, it was the one in which Hezekiah lived. Shall we today, the children of Christ, live below the standard of Hezekiah?

Isaiah 39:1–8

AT THAT TIME Merodach-Baladan son of Baladan king of Babylon sent Hezekiah letters and a gift, because he had heard of his illness and recovery. ²Hezekiah received the envoys gladly and showed them what was in his storehouses—the silver, the gold, the spices, the fine oil, his entire armory and everything found among his treasures. There was nothing in his palace or in all his kingdom that Hezekiah did not show them.

³Then Isaiah the prophet went to King Hezekiah and asked, "What did those men say, and where did they come from?"

"From a distant land," Hezekiah replied. "They came to me from Babylon."

⁴The prophet asked, "What did they see in your palace?"

"They saw everything in my palace," Hezekiah said. "There is nothing among my treasures that I did not show them."

⁵Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the LORD Almighty: ⁶The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your fathers have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the LORD. ⁷And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon."

8"The word of the LORD you have spoken is good," Hezekiah replied. For he thought, "There will be peace and security in my lifetime."

"MERODACH-BALADAN" was a Babylonian leader who was twice able to make himself king of Babylon in defiance of the Assyrians: from 721–710 B.C. and from 705–703. Even after he was ousted by Sennacherib in 703, he escaped to Elam (modern Iran), where he continued to plot against the Assyrians until his death. Obviously he was interested in encouraging any others in the Assyrian Empire who were potential allies or who would draw Assyrian attention away from him and onto themselves. The fact that he heard about Hezekiah's illness and recovery tells us both that he had a good intelligence system and that communication between the various parts of the ancient world was better than we in our modern parochialism might imagine.

It is easy to understand why Hezekiah would be glad to receive the "envoys" (39:2). After all, here is a great world leader paying attention to little Judah. There is something immensely flattering when someone whom we consider more important than we pays attention to us. But there is also something dangerous as well, namely, that we will succumb to the temptation to convince the important person that the attention being given is justified.

Sadly, that is the temptation into which Hezekiah falls. Here is a wonderful opportunity to declare the glory of God to the nations. The illness and recovery may have been only a pretext for Merodach-Baladan to do some political fence-building, but it still is the ostensible basis of the visit. So Hezekiah could have used the visit to tell the story of what the sole God of the universe did for him. But instead of making God look good, Hezekiah, like Moses long before (Num. 20:9–12), takes the opportunity to make himself look good. The detailed list of what he shows the Babylonians and the summary statement "there was nothing Hezekiah did not show them" is Isaiah's way of emphasizing how completely Hezekiah falls into the trap.²

While it is impossible to say for certain, the dialogue between Hezekiah and Isaiah in Isa. 39:3–4 seems to emphasize Hezekiah's difficulties. Isaiah appears unbidden with a direct and blunt question about what the men said and where they came from. Interestingly, Hezekiah does not tell what was said. Was there talk of political alliances? He only says they were from faraway Babylon. Perhaps he is suggesting this is different from an alliance with nearby Egypt. Isaiah does not respond to this but moves on to ask what

they saw "in your palace." This suggests that he knows perfectly well that Hezekiah has been showing off.³ To Hezekiah's credit, he does not lie. Instead, he brazens his way through, saying that they have seen "everything."⁴

Again, Isaiah does not respond directly to Hezekiah but simply announces on the authority of "the LORD Almighty" (39:5) that what the men have seen—that is, "everything in your palace"—will one day belong to the Babylonians (39:6). Not only that, but some of Hezekiah's "descendants" will be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon. This idea receives special emphasis when the prophet says that these will be the king's "own flesh and blood who will be born to you" (39:7). It is not just his possessions that will be carried off but his family too. Nothing Hezekiah has will be left.

If we had only Hezekiah's reply, "the word of the LORD is good" (39:8), it might be possible to put it in a good light. We might think that this is humble submission to God's judgment. But when we are given the reason why he said that, there is no way to clear him. He says the Lord's word is good because the judgment is not going to fall on him. How sad, and how short-sighted. This is not how we would like to remember such a good man. Yet this is how Isaiah has chosen for us to remember him. And when we recall that this event probably occurred before those of chapters 36–37, we are forced to ask why the material has been ordered in this way. In actual fact, Hezekiah rose above this point in his trust in God when faced with Sennacherib. So why are we not allowed to remember him in that way instead of this?

I believe the answer is that Isaiah wants to show us why his book cannot end here and why it was necessary to project it out into the future in the coming chapters. Yes, God has shown that he was completely trustworthy in regard to the Assyrians. But what about these lessons in trust when the enemy is no longer Assyria but is Babylon? What will those lessons be worth when Jerusalem is *not* delivered from Babylon? If the book had ended with chapter 37, future readers could well say that in Babylon God's people met a force superior to Sennacherib. Furthermore, those readers could say that the Messiah whom Isaiah predicted had come in the person of Hezekiah and that the promises had nothing more to offer them.

However, by showing that Hezekiah is both mortal and fallible, Isaiah does two things. (1) He shows that trust is intended to be a way of life, not a one-time experience. This is not only true for Hezekiah but for the nation as well. The possibility of trust had been demonstrated, but something more was necessary to enable the nation to practice such trust in an unreserved way. What that something was must yet be revealed, but it would be in the chapters to come. (2) Isaiah is showing that there is no final salvation in a human being, no matter how good he might be. Our hope is not in the perfectibility of humanity. The Messiah we look for is better than that.

Bridging Contexts

THE BABYLONIAN EXILE did not occur because of Hezekiah's failure to seize an opportunity to glorify God before the Babylonians. To be sure, it is intriguing to think of how history may have been different if he had, but that is not the point Isaiah is making. Hezekiah's behavior is illustrative, not causal. Why did the Babylonian exile occur? Because the nation, like Hezekiah, saw trust as a one-time affair rather than a way of life. So Hezekiah's reign, perhaps the best overall in Judah's history, was followed by Manasseh's, unquestionably the worst (cf. 2 Kings 21:10–15). That this was so is in part a testimony to the character of the people. If the revival under Hezekiah had produced a different people, their king would have behaved differently.

The same thing is true with Josiah, Manasseh's grandson. For reasons that the text does not specify, he had a heart for God and led his nation in a remarkable revival (cf. 2 Kings 23:1–3). Yet after his untimely death, the revival seems to have disappeared overnight, and his son Jehoiakim led as cynical a regime as one could imagine. Again, it is the people who failed in their trust. They saw trust as a means of getting out of a crisis rather than as the lifelong expression of a covenant relationship.

Perhaps more to the point, they saw trust only as a means of getting their needs met. But that reduces trust into a device for manipulation. When it is used in that way, it is bound to fail, for God cannot be manipulated. The result is the same today as it was in Judah and Israel: We turn to other means of manipulation to supply our needs—in their case, the worship of other gods.

As I have said frequently before, idolatry is an attempt to manipulate our environment in such a way as to meet our needs. The idolatrous instinct is ever-present with us, and as soon as we abandon trust in God, idolatry in one form or another is waiting in the wings. This is even more likely if we evaluate our success in life, as Hezekiah seems to have done, by our possessions. We keep confusing ends and means. The intended end of our lives is abundant life, the life in which God's fullness is poured into ours. A by-product of that fullness is physical and material blessing. But that is *only* a by-product. When we make it an end and put it forward as the evidence of our success in life, manipulation of God in order to secure that end is almost inescapable. Manipulation and trust are incompatible.

Contemporary Significance

THE QUESTION THIS chapter raises for us is, Who gets the glory? If both Moses and Hezekiah failed at this critical point, we are certainly not immune. In both cases they were faced with seemingly impossible situations. For Moses there was nothing around but rocks and gravel, yet his people were dying of thirst. Hezekiah was faced with the apparent inevitability of his death. Both men did the right thing in turning to God in their distress. Neither prayer is an attempt to tell God what to do or to manipulate him with some super-faith. Both are simply appeals from the heart. In both cases God took immediate action. But here is where the tragedy emerges. Moses says, "Must we produce water for you, you rebels?" And he struck the rock with his rod, making it appear as if he were producing the water. We know what Hezekiah did.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer and say the words "Hallowed be your name," what are we saying? We are asking that God will be seen in the world as he truly is: high and lifted up, both in power and in character. Yet how often do we take the credit for what goes right in our lives and blame God for what goes wrong? When we have ended up in an impossible situation and then have somehow gotten out of it, who gets the credit in the eyes of the world? Us or God?

Even beyond that, what are we showing to the world? Are we showing them our accomplishments, or even our spirituality? Who gets the glory? There are, of course, ways of drawing attention to ourselves by constantly dragging God into all our conversations. I am not talking about that. But the person who has cultivated a life of trust, who knows that everything he or she has is a gift from God, will be constantly deflecting the praise and honor from himself or herself to God. If that kind of deflection is not occurring, then perhaps I need to ask myself if I truly believe that what I am and have is a gift, or do I believe I produced it, either through my physical effort or, worse, through my spiritual effort. Hezekiah and his achievements cannot save the world; only Christ can. Neither can your achievements or mine. Who is getting the glory?

Isaiah 40:1-31

¹COMFORT, COMFORT MY people, says your God.
 ²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

³A voice of one calling:

 "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD;
 make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.

 ⁴Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.
 ⁵And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

- ⁶A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?"
- "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.
- ⁷The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them.

Surely the people are grass.

8The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever."

⁹You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" ¹⁰See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. ¹¹He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

12Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?
Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance?
13Who has understood the mind of the LORD, or instructed him as his counselor?
14Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way?

Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding?

¹⁵Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the

ney are regarded as dust on the scales;

he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust.

¹⁶Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires, nor its animals enough for burnt offerings.

¹⁷Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing.

¹⁸To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare him to?

- ¹⁹As for an idol, a craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it.
- 20A man too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot.
 He looks for a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not topple.

Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood since the earth was founded?
22He sits enthroned above the circle of the

and its people are like grasshoppers.

earth.

He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in.

²³He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.

²⁴No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground,

than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

25"To whom will you compare me?
Or who is my equal?" says the Holy
One.

²⁶Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these?

He who brings out the starry host one by one,

and calls them each by name.

Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.

²⁷Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel,

"My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God"?

²⁸Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. ²⁹He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.
³⁰Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall;
³¹but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Original Meaning

CHAPTER 40 INTRODUCES the third major division of Isaiah: chapters 40–55. The question of the Lord's trustworthiness has been thoroughly answered. But the question remains: What will motivate the people of God to actually trust him and become the servants that they are called to be? Furthermore, how will it be possible for sinful Israel to become God's servants at all? What is to be done about the sin that has alienated them from God?

To answer these questions the prophet projects himself out into the future where these questions will be seen in their full poignancy. In the context of the coming Babylonian exile, he addresses the questions he knows the exiles will be prompted to ask by that crisis. Chapters 40–55 answer the questions in two subdivisions. (1) Chapters 41–48 address Israel's captivity in Babylon. If they are to be the redeemed servants of the Lord, they need to be free in order to worship God in the land of the promises. These chapters speak of God's capacity to deliver and his desire to do so. (2) Chapters 49–55 address the prior issue of what needs to be done about the sin that got the people in their dilemma in the first place.

Isaiah recognizes that the Exile will bring up questions about these issues. Although the questions are never specifically stated, answers are given again and again to implied questions. The first answer is: "I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me" (46:9, etc.). The second is: "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God" (41:10, etc.). What, then, are the questions? They are: "Has not God been defeated by the gods of Babylon?" and "Has not our sin separated us from God forever?" To both of these, Isaiah answers with a resounding

"no." God has not been defeated either by the Babylonian gods or by his people's sin. In fact, God will use the evidence of their lives to demonstrate his sole Godhood. Far from being cast off, they will be his witnesses in his case against the idols.

These two themes emerge at once in chapter 40. The chapter has two main divisions: verses 1–11 and verses 12–26, with verses 27–31 acting as a kind of summary conclusion. In the first section, the question of whether God has cast his people away is addressed. Echoing the words of Isaiah 12, where this event is anticipated, God speaks not judgment but comfort. He will deliver them, and they will be in a position to tell the world of the deliverance. Then in 40:12–26, he speaks of his ability to deliver them. He is the incomparable God, like whom there is no other. The nations of earth are nothing to him, so they need not fear that they have been abandoned. They need only to wait in hope for the time to come (40:27–31).

The dominant idea here is that of the undeserved grace of God. This is what will motivate the people to trust God, just as was intimated in chapter 12. When God delivers his people without any deserving on their part, they will at last be willing to cast themselves on him without reservation. So if chapters 7–39 were about trust as the basis for servanthood, chapters 40–55 are about grace as the motive and the means of servanthood.

God's Promised Deliverance (40:1–11)

THESE VERSES ARE often referred to as the "prologue" to the book of "Second Isaiah." Some have even seen them as the call of the anonymous prophet who is supposedly responsible for the book. More recent thinking has suggested that the real significance of the material is not as a new call but as an extension and expansion of chapter 6.2 No longer is the prophetic message to be primarily one of judgment. That point has been made and will be confirmed in the fires of the Exile. Now, however, the message is to be one of hope. Special prominence is given to speech in the passage. Although the people have withered and fallen like dried grass, God's word as spoken by his prophet will not fail. Just as he had said that judgment would come, and it had, so he now says restoration will come, and it will!

Verses 1 and 2 provide an introduction and set the tone for the following three three-verse stanzas. The idea of the word translated "comfort" (v. 1) is to "encourage," as is "speak tenderly" (v. 2). Isaiah sees a day when God's

servants will be crushed to the ground under the burden of their sins. They will feel sure that all is lost and that all the promises have been nullified by their rebellion. But the message to be proclaimed to them is that this is not so.⁴ The Exile is not to destroy them but only to punish them. Now that punishment is complete ("double"), and God has a word of hope for them.

In the first stanza (40:3–5), some of the language of chapter 35 is resumed. There is a "highway" in the "desert/wilderness." But in this case, the highway is for "our God." As in 52:7 and 63:1, it is God who comes to helpless Zion to set her free. Nothing can prevent his swift coming to his people's aid, neither mountains nor valleys. The highway will be level and straight, so that God can come quickly. Once again, the identity of the one speaking is not important. Rather, it is the word to be spoken. If there is to be deliverance for God's people, it must come from God's direct intervention. There is no other hope.

That fact is underlined in the second stanza (40:6–8), where perhaps another voice (though possibly the same voice as in vv. 3–5) cries out that "all men [Heb. flesh] are like grass." This has a twofold implication. On the one hand, Judean flesh is like grass. They have been consumed by their sins, and there is no permanence in them at all, nor is there anything they can do to help themselves. But it is also true that Babylonian flesh is as grass. If the Judeans are to be delivered, God will have to do it. But if he *does* decide to do it, there is nothing the Babylonians can do to prevent it. There is no permanence in anything human, but if God speaks a promise, that "word" will stand, and nothing earthly can alter it.

Because that is so, "Zion" has a word to declare to the surrounding villages. There is some controversy about the speaker in this final stanza (40:9–11). One possibility is that represented in the NIV text, namely, that there is yet a third unidentified speaker, who is commanded to bring the "good tidings to Zion." There is a certain attractiveness to this proposal since the content of the previous stanzas has been addressed to Zion.

However, the most natural way to read the Hebrew is that Zion is this messenger of good tidings. There is a consistency in that point of view also, in that Zion's place is not merely as a recipient of God's grace but also as a messenger of that grace to the surrounding world. The good news, as it is stated later in 52:7, is about the intervention of God in the world: He "comes." The Creator breaks into his world, both to break the power of evil

with his strong "arm" (40:10) and, "like a shepherd," to gather up the broken in his gentle "arms."

God's Ability to Deliver His People (40:12–26)

THE FIRST SECTION (40:1–11) has verified God's desire and intention to deliver his people, but can he do it? After all, from one perspective, he seemed unable to prevent the Babylonians from capturing the land and city in the first place, so why should we think he can deliver the people from them? This question becomes even more pointed when we recall that there is no evidence any people have ever gone home from captivity before. In all the long history of exile up until the fall of Babylon, there is no report of that ever happening. Thus, for God to say that it is going to happen for the Israelites is to make a large claim.

Isaiah's approach to answering the question as to whether God can deliver from Babylon is to assert that God is unique. He is able to deliver not because he is greater than the Babylonian gods; he is able to deliver because he is the only God! As Hezekiah said of his neighbors' gods (37:19), what the Babylonians were worshiping are not gods at all.

Isaiah 40:12–26 can be divided into two sections that parallel each other in general ways (vv. 12–20 and vv. 21–26). Each unit begins with an assertion, in the form of rhetorical questions, that the Lord is the sole Creator (40:12–14, 21). This is followed by an affirmation that the Lord is the Ruler of all nations and rulers (40:15–17, 22–24). Next is a rhetorical invitation to compare God with anything else (40:18a, 25). Finally, there is the claim of absolute superiority over the gods, whether conceived of as idols (40:18b–20) or as the heavenly host (40:26).

In 40:12–14 the prophet employs a series of rhetorical questions intended to bring the reader to the point of saying that Yahweh is the sole Creator. The doctrine of creation is important to the argument of this part of the book. The concept is not developed in logical proofs as much as it is assumed and built upon. The prophet has received it and accepts it gladly as a part of his arsenal. Here he develops the point by insisting that God is other than creation. He is *not* the mountains or the oceans or the heavens, but he is *other* than all of these. He is not them but holds them in his hand. He originated the world, but he is not the world.

Verses 13–14 seem particularly aimed at the polytheistic religions, where a counselor/magician among the gods assists the other gods in realizing their purposes. Isaiah insists that there are no such beings, that "understanding" originated with the Originator of all things. To think otherwise is to give up transcendence, and to give that up is to be dropped into the morass where life is only the outworking of a deterministic cycle coming from nowhere and going nowhere.

Compared to the One who holds the oceans in his hand, the nations of the earth are "nothing" (40:17). Unlike the other gods, the God of Israel is not a personalization of his nation. He brought all the nations into existence, but he is not an extension of any one of them. To him the most important of the nations does not weigh enough to even move a balance scale. Babylon and Assyria and Egypt may be great in their own eyes and in the eyes of their neighbors, but in the eyes of the One who spoke light into existence, they mean little. Verse 16 illustrates this point by saying that no earthly sacrifice is sufficient to manipulate him in favor of earthly concerns. If all the forests of Lebanon were set on fire and all its animals burned on the fire, it would not affect him at all.

Thus, if the Lord is the sole Creator and the Lord of the nations, will we say that an idol is comparable to him? Certainly not! The diatribe against the idols in 40:18b–20 is the first of several in this part of the book (41:6–7; 42:17; 44:9–20; 46:5–7; 48:5). It is the complement to the prophet's insistence on the transcendence of God. If God is not the world, then any attempt to represent him in the forms of this world has deadly consequences. It immediately links him to the world and begins the process of ultimately making him identical with the world. The emphasis on the making of the idol is surely intentional. How can something made by humans possibly be the maker of the humans who made it?

The cycle begins again with Isa. 40:21, where the prophet asserts that God is not only other than the world but also other than the heavens, having stretched them out "like a tent" (40:22). As a result, he is not overawed by the "rulers" (40:23) of this earth. In fact, their destiny (like Sennacherib's) is in his hands (cf. Dan. 4:34–35). Verse 24 with its comparison of the kings of earth to plants seems to reflect 40:6–8. Like plants, the kings grow up quickly and wither away. The reflection may extend to the breath of God

("blows") being associated with the word of God (40:8). The tender plants of humanity are no match for the eternal judgments of God.

Thus, once again we, the readers, are asked—this time by God himself—if we know of anything to compare with him. If it is not the gorgeous idols of the craftsmen, perhaps it is the stars of heaven, the "starry host" that the pagans believed were representations of the gods (cf. 2 Kings 17:16; 21:3). To that suggestion Isaiah retorts that God "created" them and brings them out night after night "by name," like a shepherd calling his flock. Is the product on the same plane as the maker or the sheep on the same plane as the shepherd? No, the stars only exist because of the "mighty strength" of Judah's God.

Waiting in Hope (40:27–31)

BOTH OF THE questions the exiles will be asking have now been fully answered. What is an appropriate response? That question is answered in these closing verses. In 40:27 the prophet anticipates the attitude of the exiles, who will be saying that they are either now outside of God's vision for them ("my way is hidden") or else God has given up on them ("my cause is disregarded"). To this Isaiah responds that to think in this way is to have much too low a view of God. He reminds them of who God is in 40:28–29, dealing with the Creator's endless power and wisdom in the first verse and his wonderful desire and ability to share that power with the "weak" and the "weary" in the second. So he speaks of both the being and the person of God.

Thus, his question in 40:28 is rather incredulous. How could you say such things about God when you know perfectly well who he is and what he is like? He knows your situation perfectly, and he can and will do something about it. The fact is that the most vigorous things in creation ("young men") cannot keep themselves going. They are not self-generating but are dependent on outside sources for their strength. God is not like that; he *is* self-generating, and that means he has abundant strength to give away to those who will wait for (NIV "hope in") him.

Here we come back to the theme of trust. This concept of trust as waiting has appeared three times previously in the book (8:17; 25:9; 33:2) and will appear twice more (49:23; 64:4). To "wait" on God is not simply to mark time; rather, it is to live in confident expectation of his action on our behalf.

It is to refuse to run ahead of him in trying to solve our problems for ourselves. Thus, just as Isaiah called on the people of his own day to trust God to solve their problems, he calls on the exiles in the age to come to do the same thing. If they are worn out and weary, hardly daring to believe that there is any future for them, the God of all strength can give them exactly what they need at the right time, whether to "soar," "run," or "walk."

Bridging Contexts

TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMANENCE. The idea of God's coming is a central one for the biblical message. Since God is conceived of as being "outside" of creation, it is critical whether he can enter into his creation. This has been a chief criticism of the doctrine of transcendence from the outset. After all, if God is truly other than the world, can he possibly be present in it or participate in its life? This is what led Plotinus to his idea of the "Good Mover." If there really is a first cause, he reasoned, then that force must be incapable of being acted upon by any other cause. Similarly, the Gnostics of the early Christian era argued that this dark and sinful world cannot be entered into, or even have been created by, the one who is altogether good. So they reasoned that there must be an infinite number of mediators between us and that One.

More recently the school of thought known as *process theology*, as first expounded by A. N. Whitehead, has sought to address the same problem. These theologians believe that unless God is somehow identified with the unfolding process, we have no choice but to abandon the concept of God altogether as irrelevant to our concerns. Thus, they identify him as the love that drives the process and to which the process tends as its goal.

But this is another example of the danger of forcing the biblical data into our logical boxes. As with sovereignty and human freedom, both the absolute otherness of God *and* his ability to be present with his creation are taught by the Bible, and if we diminish either in an attempt to make them conform to our logical limitations, we have done damage to the full revelation. For instance, if God is not transcendent, then he lacks the power to change our circumstances. But more importantly, we also have lost any reason to change those circumstances because they are simply part of the ineluctable consequences of being caught on the wheel of existence that has

neither beginning nor end. But if God is only transcendent, then he neither knows nor cares what is happening in our lives. He is simply other than we, bringing us into existence and providing the energy that powers the cosmos, but he remains untouched by the changing, fluctuating movements of the world.

The Bible insists that *both* propositions are equally true. On one account, God "sits above the circle of the earth" (40:22). He is not the sun, moon, or stars, nor is he to be identified with any process of earth, whether physical, political, or psychological. He is above and beyond all of that. But at the same time, he *is* love. Immediately, we must say that this is not to reduce God to all that we call love. It seems to me that this is one of the dangers of process theology. Paganism identifies the gods with the natural systems of time and space, while process theology identifies God with the psychological and historical systems of time and space. Furthermore, it was a good deal easier to say that the historical process was leading us toward the goal of love in 1901 than it is in 2001. No, to say that God is love is to move the connection in the opposite direction. It is to say that everything we know and think of as love is partial and derivative of the totality that love is in God. What this means is that God is intimately involved with the life of his creation but is not at the same time just an expression of that life.

This truth is summed up in Isaiah 40: God is outside of the systems of time and space, which means he is not conditioned by any of those systems. He can intervene in them at will and change any of them to suit his grand design. Furthermore, it means he can *have* a grand design. He can have a plan that is not merely an expression of what is but something to which the "is" can be made to conform. Yet even though he is outside of time and space, he is not limited by them. He is aware of our distress and our captivity, our joy and our accomplishments, and he is able to come to us, sharing the joy and delivering us from our distress. He is great enough to be able to help, and he is near enough to want to help.

All of this is summed up in Jesus Christ. Thus, it is entirely appropriate that the New Testament sees John the Baptist as the second voice here, who prepares the way for God's coming in the desert (Mark 1:2–3). It is also significant that like the anonymous voice here, emphasizing the central importance of the message, John says, "He must become greater; I must

become less" (John 3:30). The identity of the herald is not that important, but the One who is coming, the eternal Word, is all-important.

Without worrying about logical contradiction, all four Gospels insist that Jesus is God and man at the same time. His humanity is assumed, but his deity is also both implied and asserted. Matthew says in the mouth of Peter, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). In Mark, in response to the question as to whether he is "the Son of the Blessed One," Jesus responds, "I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:62). Luke expands both the question and the answer. The rulers ask, "Are you then the Son of God?" And Jesus replies, "You are right in saying I am" (Luke 22:70). But it is in John that the equation is made most explicit. References can be multiplied, but two must suffice. In John 10:30 Jesus says, "I and the Father are one," and in 14:9 he says, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." Paul too states the principle in unequivocal terms in Philippians 2:6–11:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth. and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

In Jesus Christ the linking of the transcendent God with the immanent God has come to its climax. In him the transcendent God has come to us in

both humility and power. He not only knows our condition and is moved by it, he has even entered into that condition. He has come!

The doctrine of creation. Closely related to the doctrine of transcendence is the doctrine of creation. In some ways all the rest of biblical faith stands or falls with this truth. It is important to say at once that this is not to espouse a particular theory of creation. There are those today who insist that unless you accept that the cosmos was created in seven twenty-four-hour days about six thousand years ago, you do not really believe in creation. This is to confuse expression and truth. The truth of creation is that God, who is a spirit, existed before matter, that the cosmos came into existence at his command and was not the result of a conflict between eternal forces of good and evil, that creation conformed precisely to a preexisting plan, that creation was both orderly and progressive, that God directed every phase, and that humanity is the apex of creation.

Precisely how these principles were worked out in scientific terms leaves open any number of possibilities, so that to spend a great deal of time trying to defend the literal nature of the Genesis accounts misses the point. The key point is that these ideas are diametrically opposed to the stories of the origin of the cosmos both in the ancient Near East and elsewhere in the world. They are unparalleled, and the whole structure of biblical faith rests on them.

Let me develop some of the implications of the biblical doctrine of creation briefly, especially as they relate to this chapter. (1) If matter were to precede spirit, human personality is only of an accidental nature and is finally insignificant. (2) If the cosmos happened by chance, life is without both meaning and purpose. (3) If the cosmos originated out of eternal conflict, whether called "good" and "evil," or "positive" and "negative," the human quest for peace and personal integration is useless, grasping for the wind. (4) If the present condition of the cosmos is the result of an evolution governed by the interrelationship of mindless, irresistible forces, there is no possibility of personal transformation. "Salvation" can never be more than self-actualization.

In fact, if the Bible's doctrine of creation is wrong, then everything the Bible holds out to us is not only wrong, but also positively perverse. It prompts us to reach for beautiful hopes that are nothing more than soap bubbles in the air. But in fact, what the Bible teaches us is so odd that we

cannot account for it in any other way than the one the biblical writers give us: They got it from God. Their disembodied voices that come to us across the centuries are the very Word of God, which does not pass away.

Contemporary Significance

Contradictory world. It is a world that has resulted from taking some of the premises of the Bible while rejecting others. We passionately believe, for example, in the worth of the individual and are willing to fight to the death for the absolute right of human choice. Where has that idea come from? It comes straight out of the Bible, where humans are called to voluntarily enter into a relationship with the eternal God, one who knows them by name. The Bible is not about a "people movement" or "national development." It is about real, distinctive individuals, from Adam to the apostle Paul. To be sure, they were a part of a people, a nation. But the story is not first about the nation. It is about people in the nation.

The greatest story in the ancient Near Eastern world was the Gilgamesh Epic. It is found everywhere in one form or another. In it Gilgamesh seeks the meaning of life, and the story is engaging. But Gilgamesh is not a historical individual; he represents humanity. That is not the case in the Bible; it records the acts of real people. Where the Bible has not penetrated, individual human worth does not exist.

We also believe in progress. We believe that we are not locked in, that we can go someplace else and do something else; in words that now sound a little quaint, we can "better ourselves." Where did that notion come from? It comes from the Bible. God had a plan for an Abraham, a Moses, a David, and we can trace how that plan unfolds not only in progress but sometimes in regress. God had a plan for a people in bondage to the greatest powers of their day. We see those plans unfolding as people leave the husks of the past behind them and are transformed. Where has the idea of progress existed in the world? Wherever the Bible has gone.

But now the Bible is increasingly lost in Western society, and with it we have lost its central idea, the idea of transformation. So we fight for individual rights, and yet we increasingly deny any responsibility for our choices, arguing that we really do not have any choices since we are

conditioned by society, our family, some tragedy, or even our genes. What has happened? We have kept the Bible's conclusion but denied its premises. We have accepted human worth while buying into deterministic evolution.

But it does not work that way. If we are simply the end product of mindless forces, without real choices of our own, then we have no freedom and no worth. On the one hand, if we really believe that a killer has no choice but to do what he does, then we should let him go, for it is unjust to punish him for what he cannot help doing, and there are no "corrective influences" on earth that are going to change a lifetime of genetic and social conditioning. On the other hand, if in society's collective wisdom his behavior is not conducive to the progress of evolution, then we simply ought to rub him out on the spot without a lot of moralizing about justice and right and wrong. Those principles do not exist in a world without creation.

The same thing has happened to our view of progress. The biblical view is profoundly linear. Believers are not trying to get back to the place they started. Once Eden was lost, there is no recovering it. But it is possible to have something even better! The new heavens and the new earth are better than Eden, and the blessings of the redeemed as described in the eschatological parts of the Bible are something better than the blessings of Eden." That is the kind of God we serve. But without a Creator able to do new things, there may be change, but there is no progress.

That is what has happened to us. We no longer really believe we can transcend our past. We no longer believe that we can escape its dead hand on us. In a frenzy of activity we keep changing, but always with the sick knowledge that we are simply doomed to do it all over again in a different way. So we cry for "progress," having thrown away the only basis on which real progress can rest, namely, the possibility that the transcendent God can break in from outside and change us.

But what about the world where creation does exist? What about a world where humans have been created in the image of God? What about a world that originally conformed to a master plan and, though terribly marred, still has its outlines? What about a world whose omnipotent Maker is determined to give abundant life to every person who will let him? The Judeans in captivity were much like us. They did not believe there was any way God could transform them or their circumstances. They insisted on

their "freedom" to personally do as they wished while all the time believing that their situation could never really be changed.

Hope. It is into a setting just like ours that Isaiah speaks by inspiration. He speaks to people who have lost hope. The impossible has happened. They were sure their nation could not fall, that their temple could not be destroyed, and that their God would not let them down. Yet all that happened. Whatever the future might hold, it would always be one of regret. Yes, God may have acted in the past, for other people, but this situation is beyond him. It is beyond his compassion ("he has forgotten me"), and it is beyond his power ("my way is hidden from him").

Isaiah says to us as he said to them, "No! There is nothing beyond his compassion or his power. Have you not known? Have you not heard?" There is nothing that a caring Creator cannot change. We are persons of worth to him, and that means that we really can choose to be and act differently than we have. Are there chains of conditioning on us as real as any captivity the Judeans endured? Of course there are. But the Creator can break those chains. To be sure, the way he chooses to do that is his business. One of the recurring themes in the following chapters is the discomfort the people have with the ways God chooses to act on their behalf. We cannot dictate the terms or the means, but we can hold on to him with confident hope.

In the same way, we can believe that God can change our circumstances. There can be real change for the better. That is, there can be if we believe in a God who is both outside of and inside of history. Precisely because process theology is wrong and God is not a historical process, he can intervene in that process and change it. But so much depends on our faith. I am not talking here about getting some idea and then doing a mental number on ourselves until we really believe it is going to happen. I am talking about a life of faith in God, a life where we truly release ourselves into his hands without any reservation, a life where we are constantly giving ourselves and our concerns into the caring Creator's hands.

This is clearly what the Judeans were going to have difficulty doing in the crisis of the Exile, and Isaiah knew it. In a real sense the problem he addresses in his own day and the problem he addresses in that future day are the same. In his own day, the people did not think they could trust God to deliver them from the nations, so they trusted other nations instead. In the exilic age, the people do not believe that God can deliver them either! That is why "cry" and "shout" and "speak" are so prominent.

These people needed to hear the Word of God in ways that changed how they thought. That is what we need too. We need lives of faith that are shaped by the Word of God, its view of reality, and the principles that emerge from it. If I cannot "believe" God and "hope" in him in the sense of surrendering my life to him in a kind of life that I know pleases him, then his power cannot transform me. But if I will actively believe his Word, there really are no limits to what he can do for me, for my family, and for my society.

Isaiah 41:1-20

- 1"BE SILENT BEFORE me, you islands! Let the nations renew their strength! Let them come forward and speak; let us meet together at the place of judgment.
- ²"Who has stirred up one from the east, calling him in righteousness to his service?
- He hands nations over to him and subdues kings before him.
- He turns them to dust with his sword, to windblown chaff with his bow.
- ³He pursues them and moves on unscathed, by a path his feet have not traveled before.
- ⁴Who has done this and carried it through, calling forth the generations from the beginning?
- I, the LORD—with the first of them and with the last—I am he."
- ⁵The islands have seen it and fear; the ends of the earth tremble.
- They approach and come forward;

 ⁶each helps the other
 and says to his brother, "Be strong!"
- ⁷The craftsman encourages the goldsmith, and he who smooths with the hammer spurs on him who strikes the anvil.
- He says of the welding, "It is good."
 He nails down the idol so it will not topple.

8"But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend,

⁹I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you.

I said, 'You are my servant';

I have chosen you and have not rejected you.

¹⁰So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God.

I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

11"All who rage against you will surely be ashamed and disgraced; those who oppose you

will be as nothing and perish.

¹²Though you search for your enemies, you will not find them.

Those who wage war against you will be as nothing at all.

¹³For I am the LORD, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.

¹⁴Do not be afraid, O worm Jacob, O little Israel,

for I myself will help you," declares the LORD,

your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.

15"See, I will make you into a threshing sledge, new and sharp, with many teeth.

You will thresh the mountains and crush them, and reduce the hills to chaff.

16 You will winnow them, the wind will pick them up, and a gale will blow them away.

But you will rejoice in the LORD and glory in the Holy One of Israel.

¹⁷"The poor and needy search for water, but there is none: their tongues are parched with thirst. But I the LORD will answer them: I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them. ¹⁸I will make rivers flow on barren heights, and springs within the valleys. I will turn the desert into pools of water, and the parched ground into springs. ¹⁹I will put in the desert the cedar and the acacia, the myrtle and the olive. I will set pines in the wasteland, the fir and the cypress together, ²⁰so that people may see and know, may consider and understand. that the hand of the LORD has done this. that the Holy One of Israel has created

Original Meaning

it.

THERE IS NO agreement among scholars about the structure of chapters 41 through 46. Many different proposals have been put forward, ranging from the argument that there is no structure at all to complex parallelisms. What this tells us is that the material is complex and that any proposal must be presented with diffidence. The prophet's method of presentation in these

chapters seems to be the repetition of key themes in varying ways with a certain degree of increasing specificity. Then chapter 47 draws the conclusions of what has been said as regards Babylon, and chapter 48 is a call to trust and belief.

One feature that many commentators have noted and have taken as structural indicators are the hymnic portions in 42:10–13 and 44:23. They understand these segments to bring a previous unit to a close and to introduce a new one. But those who see the material in this way do not agree as to whether these segments should be treated as the closing of the previous unit or the opening of the succeeding one.² This subtlety of transition as a feature of the book has been noted several times above. I consider them to be the opening of the succeeding unit and so see the structure as 41:1–42:9; 42:10–44:22; and 44:23–47:15.

Within 41:1–42:9, we can identify two subsections, each beginning with a challenge to the idol worshipers to present their best case that their gods are truly divine. (1) Isaiah 41:1–20 speaks of the terror that God's activities are inducing among the idol worshipers (vv. 2–7) but goes on to assure his servant Israel that they need not be afraid (vv. 8–20). (2) Isaiah 41:21–42:9 begins with a strong argument for God's superiority over the idols because he alone has foretold the future (41:21–29) and concludes by introducing the ideal Servant, through whom God will bring justice on the earth (42:1–9).

God's Challenge to the Nations (41:1)

THIS FIRST VERSE introduces a key feature of this section: an imaginary court case between God and the idols in order to determine who is really God. Each side is to bring forward evidence to prove their point. Here God calls the "nations" from the farthest ends of the earth (the "islands") to "be silent" in the presence of the Judge of the universe and to hear his evidence. Then they must make whatever response they can. By this means God will demonstrate to his fearful people that their captivity in Babylon in no way calls his power or lordship into question.

God's Activities As Evidence (41:2–7)

As HIS FIRST evidence (41:2–4), God begins with a rhetorical question in verse 2 and then repeats and answers it in verse 4. The question has to do

with who called the "one from the east." God insists that he alone has done this. Almost certainly the person being referred to is the Persian Cyrus (45:1), who was to bring down the Babylonian Empire. So God is appealing to his unique activity in history as evidence that he alone is God. He is not appealing to some activity in the cycles of nature or to some conquest over monsters in the realm of myth. This argument will be repeated and intensified several times in the next few chapters as this court case continues.

Not only does Isaiah say that God has called Cyrus forth, he also says that it is God who has given the "nations" into his hand (41:2). Cyrus is able to subdue every nation he encounters with ease, treating them like grain to be threshed because this is in the God of Israel's plan. This is expressed in 41:4 with the first occurrence of another idea that will be prominent in the next several chapters: that God knows the beginning from the end. He called forth the "first" generation, and he will be "with the last" generation when it quits the earth (cf. 43:10; 44:6; 46:10; 48:12.) He is not just a part of the process, as the pagan gods are. Rather, he stands outside of time, calling it into existence, directing its path, and bringing it to an end. "I am he" is a statement both of self-existence and self-identity. Reflecting Exodus 6:3, God says he is the One who "is." Every other life form on the planet is derivative. But he is the One who has neither beginning nor end. He simply "is."

When the "nations" of earth hear of Cyrus's earth-shaking conquests, they will be terrified (Isa. 41:5–7). But what can they do? They know of no gods who rule history on the basis of a righteous plan. So they do the only thing they can do: make better idols. This idea, already encountered in 40:25–26, will also be repeated in the coming chapters (41:22–24; 44:9–20; 46:6–7). Because there is no encouragement to be had from their gods, idol worshipers must encourage one another (41:6–7).

The author describes the complexity of the process by referring to four different classes of workers needed to make the god. It is hard work to make your maker. The comment "it is good" (41:7c) reminds us of Genesis 1, where God the Creator repeatedly says this of his creation. Most likely Isaiah is asking, "Now who is the Creator and who is the created in this picture?" If we do not have the God who has revealed himself to us, then we will have to have gods we have made for ourselves.

No Need for God's People to Fear (41:8–20)

In this section God asserts that unlike the powerful nations around them, the Judean captives have nothing to fear. Their God is no idol whom they have made. Of course, it is not enough merely to insist that he is powerful enough to do something about their situation. The other issue is whether he wants to do anything for them. These verses insist that God has not cast them off because of their sin. In fact, they are his "servant," his "chosen" (41:8, 9). God has not forgotten his promise to "Abraham."

Just as the Lord God took Abraham from Mesopotamia and the descendents of Jacob out of Egypt, he can take this generation out as well. God is "with" them, to "strengthen," "help," and "uphold" them (41:10). God is not at some far-off point, shouting instructions. He is personally present with his people, so they have nothing to "fear." Since the phrase "do not be afraid" is repeated so often in this section of the book, we know it is a central issue for the people in captivity. They are afraid God has abandoned them, so Isaiah reminds them again and again that this will not happen.

Of course, they are not only afraid that God has left them, they are also afraid that their many enemies will overpower them. That is the issue addressed in 41:11–16. God will protect them, and their enemies will simply evaporate before the Lord (41:11–12). Why? Because "I am the LORD," language that is reminiscent of the Exodus. God will demonstrate his lordship by helping his people (41:13–14). He will take an active hand in their defense. Encouragement comes from knowing that God is personally present with them in their distress and from knowing that he will be directly involved in the outcome.

The word "Redeemer" appears here in 41:14 for the first time in Isaiah, but it will appear thirteen more times between now and the end of the book (ten of them before 54:9). Here it is given a special association with "the Holy One of Israel." In chapters 1–39 this latter expression for God most frequently conveyed his transcendent power and glory. In this part of the book it is especially associated with his power to bring his own back to him.

In 41:15–16 God continues to offer his people protection from their enemies, but now the focus moves from defense to offense. Just as Cyrus will use his sword to thresh his enemies (41:2), so God is going to use Israel. A "threshing sledge" was constructed from pieces of wood with

sharp stones ("teeth") driven into them. This device was pulled around over a pile of cut grain so that the kernels of grain were separated from the husks both by the weight and by the cutting effect of the stones. God will use Israel in his plan of world history. They will not be passive by-standers, a helpless "worm" (41:14), but will be active participants with God in his work. We might think of Daniel in this respect, with his influence in both Babylon and Persia (Dan. 6:25–28), and also of Esther and Mordecai (Est. 10:1–3).

Verses 17–20 are a graphic summary of what has been said to this point. Isaiah uses the language of nature to depict a God who can do the impossible. His people are spiritually dry and desolate. Their hopes are gone and their dreams broken. Yet this God, who is not a part of the cosmic system and thus is not captive to it, can do what is new and unheard of. He can make "rivers" flow on mountaintops and cause "pools" to spring up in the "desert."

The language here reminds the attentive reader of chapter 34, where God said that he could turn the desert into a garden, indeed into a veritable forest. God reiterates that promise here, but he goes a step further in verse 20 by giving the reason for doing this for his people: so that the world may see the evidence in what God has done for Israel that he is indeed God, the Holy One. Ezekiel makes a similar point when he says that God will show himself holy among his people so that the world may know who he is (Ezek. 36:23).

Bridging Contexts

GOD AND HISTORY. The argument that is fundamental to this passage and, indeed, to this entire part of the book is that God is not part of the historical process. The conflict with the idols is made to rest on this issue. Paganism understands its gods to be continuous with this world. Thus, they cannot know how the cosmic process began or how it will end. In fact, for all practical purposes there is no beginning and end to the process. Existence is an endless cycle of birth, life, and death that, so far as we know, goes on forever. Those beings who are within the process cannot tell if there is any meaning to the process. They do not know why things happen, how long they will endure, or what they will accomplish.

If we start with the cosmic system and try to reason out to ultimate reality from it, that is where we are going to end up. All things are contingent on all other things, there is no meaning or purpose to existence, the forces of the cosmos are fundamentally impersonal, and their behavior is completely determined by their relationship to each other. This is a system made up by humans to try to explain life as we encounter it. The pagans attempt to personalize theses forces the better to understand and control them, but in the end the gods remain simply the forces of existence, whether in nature, in human society, or in the human spirit, only wearing human-like masks.

But Isaiah's response is that those forces are not gods. They have no right to be called "holy." By definition, the holy is the "other," but these beings are not other. They are part of the system. The diatribes against idols are aimed squarely at this point. Rather than go into a somewhat abstract presentation like the one just given, Isaiah is much more concrete. He says, "You have made your own gods from your own environment. So, if you made them, what can they do for you?" They cannot tell the future because they do not know the future. Neither can they tell you where you came from and what the meaning of your life is. You made them!

Only a Being who is outside of the system can bring the system into existence and give it direction. Such a Being can tell you what will happen before it happens. That Being can never be found out by starting with the system. To be sure, with his guidance, the system can give you a good deal of collateral information about him, but since he is not the system, it cannot take you to what it is not. In the end, God will have to reveal himself from beyond.⁴ That is precisely what he has done. And proof that he is beyond the system is that he can tell what will happen in advance. He is the One who has called the man from the east.

Fear. Isaiah is speaking to a people debilitated with fear. They are in a situation that is completely foreign to them. They grew up secure in their own land, confident that because they served the living God and had his temple in their midst, nothing bad could happen to them. Undoubtedly, the deliverance under Hezekiah helped foster that kind of complacency. Furthermore, since no one ever came back from captivity and since God had promised this land to them, the captivity could not occur. So when it did occur, the result was complete devastation.

We get a glimpse of this in the prophet Ezekiel. 1–24 were written before the Exile, and in them we see Ezekiel working hard to convince his hearers that Jerusalem is going to fall. Chapters 33–48 were written after the fall of Jerusalem. Here we get the sense that Ezekiel is having just as hard a time convincing his hearers that Jerusalem is going to be rebuilt.⁵ In a situation where all the old, familiar landmarks are gone and insecurity is rampant, fear is the dominant and debilitating emotion.

In his trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, J. R. R. Tolkien tells of the old king Theoden who has become convinced by his counselor Wormtongue, who is really an enemy agent, that the situation is hopeless. So he sits dejected in his darkened palace, waiting for the enemy to come and bring his kingdom and his life to an end. But one of the members of the Fellowship of the Ring, Gandalf, comes and tells Theoden that he may indeed die, but that for himself he would rather die confronting the enemy on his charger than sitting in gloom on a meaningless throne. Theoden's mind is not changed at once, but eventually under Gandalf's prodding he sees Wormtongue for who he really is. When that happens, the atmosphere changes. Theoden rises to his full height and calls for his warriors, who come with relief, and they ride to battle. In the darkest hour, a miracle occurs and the battle is won. But if fear had prevailed, there would have been no battle and no miracle.⁶

Contemporary Significance

NEW AGE RELIGION. One of the great features of the so-called Enlightenment era was the dominance of reason. Everything had to bow at the bar of reason, and if something was not amenable to human reason, it was discarded. For this reason Thomas Jefferson felt it necessary to write an abridged version of the New Testament, explicitly leaving out all references to miracles. On this basis, Rudolf Bultmann, a German New Testament scholar of the first half of the twentieth century, argued that the New Testament had to be "demythologized" for humanity "come of age" by stripping out all mention of the supernatural.

But if the emphasis on reason had significant dangers, it at least had the benefit of preventing the rise of ideas that are merely based on fancy. Now, however, the situation is changed. There is widespread disillusionment with reason in anything but the technical arena. In the realm of ultimate meaning, reason is now looked at skeptically. Two world wars have something to do with that, but also there is the sense that reason has failed to make life any more meaningful or worthwhile and that it has stifled emotions and hampered free expression.

The result is that ideas and formulations no longer need to conform to logic. If they seem good and useful to someone, then they are true. This means that paganism, which was long held at bay by reason, is back among us with new vigor. Someone can now use a computer, which is the product of pure logic and will only respond when used according to logical principles, to discourse on how he was once a knight in King Arthur's court in a previous life!

This new situation means that Isaiah's arguments have a new relevance for our day. The central issue is the one of how we know truth. Does truth come to us from inside the cosmic system or outside of it? Reason argued strongly that it came from inside the system and that the human intellect could discover all essential truth. Now that reason has been dethroned, we still believe that truth comes from inside the system, but now believe that "truth" need no longer be self-consistent or coherent. Now truth comes by intuition, and if it "works" for me, it is "true."

That is exactly the basis of paganism. Working from within the system, we imagine the various parts of it in whatever ways will make the system most amenable to control by me. These imaginings do not need to be consistent with each other, nor do they need to be logically defensible. In fact, the more effectively we can turn off the reasoning faculty, the more likely we are to encounter the divine.

Isaiah's answer to this is not a retreat to philosophical reasoning. Rather, it is an appeal to experience. Isaiah insists that truth does come from outside the system but that God has broken into the system and has shown himself to faithful witnesses. Moreover, he has shown himself to us in ways that are fully consistent and coherent. In the end, it is the Bible that shows the importance of reason. It does so through the use of reason, constantly demonstrating the link between cause and effect in the activity of God. The problem occurred when Enlightenment thinkers tried to make human reason superior to God. Isaiah's Holy One never acts in irrational ways, but at the

same time, he is never capable of being fully explained by human rational capacities. Why would we ever think he could be if he is the Holy One?

So what we need today is a rediscovery of the Word of God, both in its written and in its experiential form. We need to see the evidence in the Scriptures that there is a God who is outside the system and who can both predict in advance what the system will do and can redirect that system as necessary to achieve his goals. Then we need the evidence of changed lives that will demonstrate to the world around that there is a faithful, consistent, true God, who has broken in upon us and "has done this" (41:20). Far from disengaging us from the world in contemplation of ourselves, God wants to reengage us with the world by delivering us from ourselves.

Fear. Franklin D. Roosevelt, President of the United States during World War II, said, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." That statement, of course, is rhetorical hyperbole, but there is a great measure of truth in it. Fear and discouragement have a way of defeating us before we even attempt anything. Nothing can be accomplished through us because we are afraid to start. In many cases, if we can overcome our fear enough to begin a task, positive results occur. But how do we overcome our fear? It is because we are afraid that we cannot overcome our fear!

God's answer to fear today is the same as it was in Isaiah's day. He reminds us that we are not alone. He is with us (41:10). Nor is the One who is with us merely a projection of ourselves, as in paganism. No, the One who made us, who stands outside of all things, and who orders all things has broken into the system to be with us. Nor is this mere rhetoric. In Jesus Christ, the promise of Immanuel (Isa. 7:14) has been fulfilled (Matt. 1:23). God has stepped into our time and space, into our flesh, and is with us in every aspect of our lives.

This is the significance of Jesus' "I am" statements in the Gospel of John. He is not a dim reflection of God or a distant intermediary; he is God himself. Just as God says here, "I am he" (Isa. 41:4), so Jesus said, "I am he" (John 8:58; 18:5). God has lost none of his power or holiness in coming to us. Rather, by coming to us he is able to elevate us to his level. His presence does not guarantee success in our endeavors, but we need not fear to try because we know his presence is not contingent on success; he has promised never to leave us or to forsake us (Heb. 13:5). The seal of that promise is the presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus told his disciples that he

would leave them but then would come to them (John 14:17–20). He has done that in his Spirit. He is with us.

Not only does he promise to be with us, he promises to help us (Isa. 41:14). With the help of the entire universe at our backs, why should we be afraid? Again, this is not merely ourselves trying to magically harness the forces of the universe to do our will. It is the almighty, independent Creator, who freely comes to stand at our sides and do through us what we cannot.

There is an incredible condescension here. Why should God "help" us? What need has he for us? Why does he not just tell us to stay out of the way and watch him do his work? But no. He has given us the dignity of sharing his own image, and he will not demean us by making us merely robots to speed his cause. Why should we fear when God has bequeathed a dignity like that on us? So Christ gave his disciples the impossible task of making other disciples across the world (Matt. 28:18–20). What an unimaginable task, and yet what an incredible honor! He intends to use us in the achievement of his work. And why not, if he is with us and will help us?

Isaiah 41:21–42:9

²¹"PRESENT YOUR CASE," says the LORD. "Set forth your arguments," says Jacob's King.

²²"Bring in your idols to tell us what is going to happen.

Tell us what the former things were, so that we may consider them and know their final outcome.

Or declare to us the things to come, ²³tell us what the future holds, so we may know that you are gods.

Do something, whether good or bad, so that we will be dismayed and filled with fear.

²⁴But you are less than nothing and your works are utterly worthless; he who chooses you is detestable.

25"I have stirred up one from the north, and he comes—one from the rising sun who calls on my name.

He treads on rulers as if they were mortar, as if he were a potter treading the clay.

²⁶Who told of this from the beginning, so we could know, or beforehand, so we could say, 'He

or beforehand, so we could say, 'He was right'?

No one told of this, no one foretold it, no one heard any words from you.

²⁷I was the first to tell Zion, 'Look, here they are!'

I gave to Jerusalem a messenger of good tidings.

²⁸I look but there is no one no one among them to give counsel, no one to give answer when I ask them.

²⁹See, they are all false!

Their deeds amount to nothing; their images are but wind and confusion.

42:1"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.

²He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets.

³A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.

In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;

⁴he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth.
In his law the islands will put their
hope."

5This is what God the LORD says—
he who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it,
who gives breath to its people,
and life to those who walk on it:
6"I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness;
I will take hold of your hand.

I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles,

7to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

8"I am the LORD; that is my name!
I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols.
9See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you."

Original Meaning

WE NOW COME to Isaiah's second statement of his case against the idols (41:21–29) and his second address to the servant of the Lord (42:1–9). The case against the idols is similar to the first except that it is considerably more pointed. The address to the servant is very different from the first, so much so that we must conclude a different servant is being addressed.

The Case Against the Idols (41:21–29)

ONCE MORE GOD calls on the idol worshipers to present their case that the things they worship are really gods. In 41:22 it is not specified what they are to "bring." The NIV supplies "idols," and that is a reasonable hypothesis. Another alternative is that they are being challenged to bring forth arguments, as in verse 21.

Here Isaiah strikes directly at the heart of the pagan worldview. The prophet calls on the idolaters to give evidence that their idols have ever specifically predicted the future. The reference to "the former things" (41:22) may be understood in one of two ways. It may be speaking of the time in the past when a prediction was made. But another possibility is that Isaiah is asking for an explanation of the past and why things have

happened as they have. I believe the latter explanation is more likely. The prophet is asserting that because there is neither a sense of purpose or of overarching meaning in the worldview of continuity, there is no possibility of understanding why anything happens. And if the past cannot be explained, then what about the "future"? Have any of the gods ever given a specific prediction of something that had never happened before but that then subsequently did occur?

The answer to this question is, "Of course not." Just as the thunderstorm cannot predict where it will go or what it will do, neither can an idol. In fact, the gods are incapable of doing anything of a free or unconditioned nature (41:23). They are a part of the cyclic functioning of the cosmic system and must do what the cycle requires. They cannot vary from that pattern. So God mocks them, daring them to do anything at all. If they cannot do anything good for their worshipers, then perhaps they can do something frightening against their enemies.

But there is no answer. So God pronounces judgment (41:24). These gods are "nothing"; their works are "worthless," and those who worship them are an offense against creation (NIV "detestable"; KJV "abomination"). In attempting to deify creation, the pagans have actually committed an offense against it.

In 41:25–27 God responds to the challenge. He does have a plan for history, and what will be unfolding before the exiles' eyes will be the evidence of it. God has brought the conqueror who is coming down on Babylon like a brick-maker or a "potter," who jumps into the vat where the clay is and treads it into liquid form.

It is one thing to assert that Cyrus's coming is at the direction of "Jacob's King" (41:21), but it is quite another to prove that the assertion is so. Anyone can make the claim to have done so after the fact. But Isaiah is ready for that approach, and he has both negative and positive evidence. First of all, none of the idols predicted Cyrus's coming at all (41:26). No one can come forward and say, "That's right! That's just what my god said was going to happen." By contrast, says Isaiah, the God of Israel did make such a prediction in advance (41:27). In fact, that is exactly what he is doing through Isaiah, his "messenger of good tidings" in this very writing. The prediction is being made in what Isaiah is writing during his own lifetime. Then when that writing is read with opened eyes (when it is

"unsealed," 8:16; 29:11–12) amidst its fulfillment during the Exile (150 years later), it will become its own confirmation.²

Isaiah 41:28–29 is the pronouncement of judgment on the idol worshipers. They have been unable to give any "answer" to the questions God has asked. There is "no one" among them who can give evidence that their gods are even in the same category as Yahweh. He alone is truly Other, and thus he alone is truly Holy. All who worship something other than the true God are doomed to become like their gods: nothing, worthless, wind, and chaos.³ Their lives are doomed to become as meaningless as their gods are.

An Address to the Servant (42:1–9)

As IN 41:1–21, the court case against the gods is followed by an address to the Lord's servant. Like the prior instance, the content of the address seems to follow the content of the case presented. There the fearful servant needed to be reassured that although Cyrus's coming meant terror for the idol worshipers, it need not cause the servant any fear. Here, while the connection is not as clear, the address seems to be a further reflection on Yahweh's control of history. Just as he was able to bring down the Babylonian Empire through Cyrus, so he will bring "justice" (42:1, 3, 4) to the earth through his "servant." Verse 9 makes the connection clear by stating explicitly that the prediction concerning the servant is one of the "new things" that the gods could not declare in advance, but that the Lord can do so with impunity.

The identity of this "servant" has been the source of endless controversy.⁴ The differences between him and the servant Israel³ are striking. The servant Israel is fearful and blind, yet God loves him and will deliver him so that he can be God's evidence to the nations that he is indeed God. But this Servant, who only appears here in chapters 40–48 and but three times in chapters 49–50, is of a different sort. He is always obedient and responsive to God, his mission is to bring justice to the nations for God, and he is to be a "light" to the nations and a "covenant" to the people (of Israel, see 49:6). In contrast to the promises of divine blessing constantly being given to the servant Israel, this servant receives no benefits through his ministry but only increasing difficulty.⁶ In sum, whoever this is, it is not the nation of Israel; it is another figure altogether.

The reiterated statement that this person is going to bring justice on the earth, that God's Spirit will be on him (42:1), and that his accomplishment of this end will not be through oppression (42:3) reminds us of the prophecies of the Messiah in Isaiah 9, 11, and 32. Thus, we have a complementary picture to the one there. There we had the servant as King. Here we have the king as Servant. The idea that the ends of the earth ("the islands"), which could not defend the deity of their gods (41:1), will "put their hope [lit., wait for, trust] in his law" is further indication that this figure is a messianic one (cf. 2:1–5 and comments).

The further description of the ministry of this Servant in 42:6–7 confirms that this is not the nation but someone who will function for the nation and indeed for the world. Where Israel was blind and deaf, captive to the powers of this world, this Servant will give sight and freedom. This ministry will be the ultimate revelation of the "glory" of God, which fills the earth (6:3) and belongs to no idol (42:8).

Bridging Contexts

PREDICTIVE PROPHECY. Isaiah hangs his claim that Yahweh is the only being worthy of the title "God" squarely on the possibility of predictive prophecy. Commentators who do not believe in that possibility find themselves in something of a quandary. Brevard Childs, for example, dismisses the idea as a belief in "clairvoyance." Yet at the same time he correctly admits that the second part of Isaiah wants its readers to believe that the Exile really had been predicted by Isaiah. Everything, then, hangs on whether we admit that such a thing is possible. If we conclude it is not possible, then I would claim that all of the lofty theology of Isaiah 40–55 is suspect. If the unknown writer of the book has to falsify evidence to support his claims that God is who he says he is, then there is no reason to believe that God is any of the things this person says he is.

However, if there is such a God as Isaiah says has revealed himself to him, why is it so difficult to believe that God can tell the future? If he did create the world for a purpose, if he is leading all of history to the fulfillment of that purpose, and if he is outside of time and space but has the full capacity to intersect those realms at any point, why should we think it impossible for him to tell us what will happen in advance?

It may be urged that this is a magical and superstitious view, but that is the furthest case from the fact. The biblical prophets did not practice magical rituals in order to find out the future. Magic ritual is based on the idea of continuity. The ancients believed the position of the stars or the shape of a sheep's liver was directly related to human events, so whenever certain conditions were observed, certain events would occur. That is far from what the biblical prophets did. They were called by God into a relationship with him in which he revealed his word to them unbidden. That word addressed current conditions among his people especially in relation to their obedience to the covenant, and it pointed out the future implications of that obedience or lack thereof. This was no attempt to find out the future for the benefit of one's client.

Prediction had three main functions in the Bible. (1) It was a means of calling people to obedience, because such obedience would have positive future consequences. (2) It was a means of encouraging faith; the God whom we serve cannot be surprised by events beyond his control. (3) It served to confirm God's trustworthiness when the predicted events occurred.

Justice as right order. The Hebrew word translated "justice" in 42:1, 3, and 4 is *mišpaṭ*. In many ways it is the antonym of *tohu*, "chaos" (see n. 3, above). It is much more than merely legality, as "justice" has come to connote in English. Rather, it has the idea of "right order." This explains why it is often paralleled to <code>sedaqah</code>, which is usually translated "righteousness" but simply has the idea of "doing the right thing." This means that *mišpaṭ* has a much larger pool of connotations than does our word "justice." To be sure, a world where the innocent are punished and the oppressors go free is a world where *mišpaṭ* is lacking. The word contains everything we think of as "justice," but it contains more than that as well.

This can be further seen in the usage of the related word "judge." Many a child, hearing Samson called a "judge," has suffered from some disorientation. How could this mighty man be called a judge? That is not the way judges act today! Of course, the point of the book of Judges is that when the people have disobeyed and are being beaten down by oppressors, they are not experiencing the kind of right order that God intended in his world. So when in response to repentance and faith God sends a champion who will restore them to the kind of life God intended for them, *mišpat* is

restored in the land. So Isaiah is saying that the coming Messiah will do all that is necessary to restore God's right order on the earth.

Contemporary Significance

PREDICTIVE PROPHECY. It seems to me that the believer has to walk a middle road on the subject of prophecy in the Bible. This was brought home to me some years ago when I was teaching an adult Sunday School class. As we came to the end of one study, I asked the members of the class what part of the Bible they would like to go into next. The consensus was that they would like to study "prophecy." I was delighted with the idea and began the next week with an overview of Amos, proceeding on through Hosea and Micah. But I began to see a questioning look in the members' eyes. Although they were too polite to say so, something was wrong.

Finally, I stopped and asked them what the trouble was. After much hemming and hawing, one of them finally blurted out, "Well, we were kind of wondering when we were going to get to prophecy." Suddenly it dawned on me. When they said "prophecy," they meant predictions associated with the end of time, or "eschatological prophecy," material limited to the final chapters of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah in the Old Testament. What they really wanted was a study of the book of Revelation, supplemented by the Old Testament material.

This is a view we need to be careful of. Any attempt to use eschatological prophecy to create a timetable or roadmap of future events is filled with difficulties. If nothing else, a study of all the wrong conclusions drawn from the eschatological prophecies in the last two hundred years should lead us to a healthy caution. Furthermore, as I tried to indicate above, simple knowledge of the future is not the purpose of prediction in the Bible. The point of the predictions of Jesus' return, for example, is not so that we can figure out exactly when it will happen. Rather, it has the three purposes outlined above: We should be obedient to all of his commands, knowing that he could return at any time; we can live confidently in difficult times, knowing that evil cannot triumph in the end; and we can look forward excitedly to the hour when he returns, knowing that our faith will be climactically confirmed.

But if overfascination with eschatological prediction is to be avoided, there is another extreme that, if anything, should be even more assiduously avoided. That is a certain tendency to deny that the Bible really contains predictions. This is one of the illogical ways in which Enlightenment rationalism continues to hang on. We see those today who on the one hand insist that we can each create our own truth, while at the same time insisting that it is rationally impossible for the Old Testament writers to have predicted the coming of Christ. What the New Testament writers called prediction, they say, is simply the result of those writers having gone through the Old Testament text with a fine-toothed comb and using whatever they could find to bolster their belief that Jesus had been predicted in advance.

The first question to be posed to such a view is why the New Testament writers even thought of doing such a thing. Why did they think that his coming would have been predicted? The answer to the question is that in passages such as Isaiah 41–42, God's use of prediction is made the central evidence of his Godhood. The New Testament writers expected there would be predictions of the Messiah because that is what the Old Testament statements led them to.

The second question to those who question whether the Old Testament really predicted Christ is regarding the standard used to determine what is a valid prophecy. For instance, if we believe that the material was revealed to the writer by God, then it is not necessary that every writer understood the full implications of what he was saying about Christ for his statement to be a valid prediction. Did Micah understand all the historical implications of his statement that the "ruler over Israel" would come from Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2)? I very much doubt it. But that does not mean that those who concluded that the place to look for the Messiah was in Bethlehem were misusing an Old Testament text (Matt. 2:4–6).

It is also important to distinguish those places where there is direct prediction from those places where the New Testament writers use the Old Testament allusively or illustratively. When all is said and done, we must come back to this text and say that if the possibility of genuine prediction is denied, then one of the Bible's chief arguments for the unique deity of its God has been undercut and with it much of what else the Bible says about him and his Son.

The ministry of the Servant. If we conclude that Isaiah 42:1–9 is a prediction of the ministry of Christ, which I believe is a correct conclusion, we can see in these verses a number of indications about the dimensions of his ministry and its nature. (1) As we said above, that ministry is above all to restore God's right order in the world. This point is made three times in short order. This should remind us that to suggest that the cross of Christ is only about forgiveness of sins is unwarranted. To be sure it is about that, but it is about much more. It is about dealing with all the effects of sin in the world and about restoring God's work on all levels of society.

This message has been true of the church from the outset. It is possible to trace the progress of the church across the world by the schools and hospitals it has left in its wake. To be sure, the church has contributed its share of suffering and bloodshed. But these other benefits cannot be gainsaid. The Servant's ministry is for the restoration of God's order in the world.

- (2) Moreover, it is a worldwide ministry. The Spirit who was on Christ (Isa. 42:1; cf. John 1:32–34) impels his disciples to take his "law" (Heb. torah, "teaching, instruction") to the ends of the earth, because people everywhere are waiting for it. His light is meant to shine through his disciples to all the nations (Isa. 2:2; 66:23; Matt. 28:19–20). If a new understanding of multiculturalism means that we must constantly be on guard against merely cultural overtones in our presentation of the gospel, it must not dampen our enthusiasm for taking the gospel of Christ to the whole world. A postmodern perspective insists that all people have light, but they just have a different take on what the light consists of. Isaiah knows better. People who have made God in their own image are in the darkness, and they desperately need the light that streams from the Cross and the empty tomb.
- (3) A third aspect of the ministry of the Servant that is especially relevant for our time is its manner. The ancient kings boasted about the ferocious ways in which they brought "justice" to their kingdoms and about the heavy yokes they imposed on any whom they conquered. This Servant brings God's right order into the world not from a position of strength but of weakness. He does not break an already-bent reed, nor does he quench a candle flame that is already flickering. Christ disarmed his enemies with love and grace and gentleness.

We must minister in the same way. In many ways this is the most difficult part of the ministry of Christ for many of us. We find it difficult to give up the assertiveness that has manifested itself in us since we were born. We want what we want when we want it, and there are many different justifications offered for an assertive, dominating Christianity. But the word of God still stands:

He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal's death on a cross. (Phil. 2:7–8 NLT)

A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master. (Matt. 10:24 NRSV)

Isaiah 42:10-43:7

¹⁰SING TO THE LORD a new song, his praise from the ends of the earth, you who go down to the sea, and all that is in it,

you islands, and all who live in them.

¹¹Let the desert and its towns raise their voices;

let the settlements where Kedar lives rejoice.

Let the people of Sela sing for joy; let them shout from the mountaintops.

¹²Let them give glory to the LORD and proclaim his praise in the islands.

13The LORD will march out like a mighty man.

like a warrior he will stir up his zeal; with a shout he will raise the battle cry and will triumph over his enemies.

¹⁴"For a long time I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back.

But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant.

¹⁵I will lay waste the mountains and hills and dry up all their vegetation;

I will turn rivers into islands and dry up the pools.

¹⁶I will lead the blind by ways they have not known,

along unfamiliar paths I will guide them:

I will turn the darkness into light before them

and make the rough places smooth.
These are the things I will do;
I will not forsake them.

17But those who trust in idols,
who say to images, 'You are our gods,'
will be turned back in utter shame.

¹⁸"Hear, you deaf; look, you blind, and see! ¹⁹Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one committed to me, blind like the servant of the LORD? ²⁰You have seen many things, but have paid no attention; your ears are open, but you hear nothing." ²¹It pleased the LORD for the sake of his righteousness to make his law great and glorious. ²²But this is a people plundered and looted, all of them trapped in pits or hidden away in prisons. They have become plunder, with no one to rescue them; they have been made loot, with no one to say, "Send them back."

²³Which of you will listen to this or pay close attention in time to come?
²⁴Who handed Jacob over to become loot, and Israel to the plunderers?
Was it not the LORD, against whom we have sinned?
For they would not follow his ways; they did not obey his law.

25So he poured out on them his burning anger, the violence of war.
It enveloped them in flames, yet they did not understand; it consumed them, but they did not take it to heart.

43:1But now, this is what the LORD says—he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:
"Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

²When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers,

they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;

the flames will not set you ablaze.

³For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;

I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead.

⁴Since you are precious and honored in my sight,

and because I love you,

I will give men in exchange for you, and people in exchange for your life.

⁵Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east

and gather you from the west.

⁶I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.'

Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth—

7everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Original Meaning

IN ONE SENSE what has preceded this section in chapters 40–42 has been introductory. Chapter 40 gave a general introduction to the two great themes, God's love and his unique power. Then 41:1–42:9 gave a more specific introduction to God's case against the idols and to the two servants: the one fearful and the other ministering God's justice to the world. Now in 42:10–44:22 there is even greater specificity as God declares his intention to deliver his people from their distress and to use them as his witnesses against the idols. The section has two parts, generally following these two themes: 42:10–43:7 addresses the certainty of God's deliverance, and 43:8–44:22 deals with how that deliverance will witness for God and against the idols.

A Hymn of Praise (42:10–17)

As NOTED ABOVE (see comments on 41:1–20), there is considerable disagreement as to whether 42:10–13 goes with the previous section, belongs to the following one, or stands alone. I do not believe these verses are intended to stand alone, but there are good arguments for reading it with either the previous section or the following one. I believe it fits best with what follows.¹

Isaiah calls on the whole world to give praise to God (42:10–12). Normally such a call is followed by a general statement of the reason for giving praise to God (cf. 42:13) and then an expanded discussion of that reason (cf. 42:14–17). The extremities of earth (e.g., the "ends of the earth" and the "islands") are particularly emphasized, probably as a way of expressing totality (cf. 41:5; 42:4). Likewise, the "sea," the "desert," and "the mountaintops" all convey the idea of the extremes of earth. Isaiah is emphasizing that the Lord is not simply the God of Judah. He is the God of

the whole world, and what he is going to do for Judah has joyous implications for the whole world. If he can deliver Judah from all its captivities, then there is no one whose distress and difficulty is beyond his care and his delivering power.

Verses 14–17 expand on the promise of verse 13, where God is depicted as "warrior" coming to the defense of people. If it seems to them that he has "kept silent" (v. 14) for a long time as they have endured the Exile, that time is coming to a rapid close. Just as the nine months of gestation come to a sudden climax in birth, so God is going to birth a new thing on behalf of his people. Whatever obstacles may stand in the way, whether forested mountains or rapid rivers, will present no obstacle to God (v. 15). He will make a "smooth" way for his people to travel on (cf. 35:8–10), and even though they are "blind," he will lead them, giving them "light" for their darkness (42:16). This means that their worst fears—that God has either abandoned them or is helpless to come to their aid—are groundless.

By contrast, the Babylonian gods will be helpless to assist their people (42:17). The Judeans should not make the mistake of thinking that since they are in Babylon, the Babylonian gods have won so that they should now put their trust in those gods. Anyone who trusts in them will be put to "shame"; that is, it will be shown that they trusted the wrong things. Those gods are helpless to do anything for their people. They must inevitably fail them. So the contest with the gods is moved to a new level. Not only are they unable to explain the meaning of life and to tell the future, they are also unable to care for and deliver their worshipers.

The Issue of God's Deliverance (42:18–43:7)

This next section expands on the promise of God's deliverance that was introduced in the preceding call to praise (42:10–17). It begins in 42:18–25 by calling on the people to recognize that what befalls them in the Exile will not be the result of God's failure to deliver them but precisely because he sent them there. The underlying logic is that if the Babylonians had indeed taken the people from God's hand against his will, there is no way he could now be strong enough to take them back. But that is not the case. Because God is the One who sent them into exile, he is fully able to take them back whenever he chooses.

Verses 18–20 remind us that servant Israel is not in a position to do anything for itself or for the world. As 6:9–10 predicted, they became "blind" and "deaf" under the ministry of Isaiah and all the prophets. The more they heard of God's admonition and instruction, the more "blind" and "deaf" they became. Because God does what is right ("for the sake of his righteousness"), he made his truth (*torah*; NIV "law") as "great and glorious" as possible (42:21). He gave it in the wonder and the terror of Sinai and adorned it with the lives and the witness of saints and prophets through the years. Yet everything he did seems to have been of no avail. The people plunged deeper and deeper into their sin until all that they worked so hard for, and even they themselves, became "loot" and "plunder" (42:22).

But now the prophet commands the "deaf" to "listen." Perhaps the tragedy of the Exile will unstop their ears a little. He calls on them to ask why they are in exile (42:22–24). It is not by accident or because of Babylon's great might. Rather, they are in exile because of sin against God. They did not obey his "law," his instruction, which formed the terms of their covenant with him, and as a result he gave them over to be looted and plundered. Yet, even as this was unfolding, as prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel were speaking and as these words of Isaiah were there to be read, no one seemed able to learn the obvious lessons (42:25). God brought them down to destruction in punishment for their sin, but no one seemed to get the point.

So what is God to do after the looting and plundering have become fact? The shift in tone from 42:25 to 43:1 is breathtaking. What God will now do is grace. Interestingly, there is nothing the Judeans have to do in advance for this grace to become available to them. They do not have to repent or promise to change their ways. God simply declares, as in 40:1–2, that he has "redeemed" them. It is a completed fact. The association with creation in 43:1 is important. It is because God created them that he can redeem them. God, as Creator, is free from any constraint by the system he created. Therefore, he can do a new thing and can redeem his people both from their captivity and from their sin. So he insists that the judgment that befell them was not intended to destroy them and will have no power to do so (43:2). The only way of hope for these people is through the fires of judgment (see comments on ch. 5). But it is the way of hope and not the way of destruction, as they feared.

The key to all of this is the personal relationship of God to his people. The recurrence of the pronouns "I" and "you" throughout 43:1–7 is striking. Twice God says, "I am/will be with you" (vv. 2, 5). He identifies himself by relation to them, calling himself "the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior" (v. 3). The Creator of the universe deigns to give himself to them as their personal possession because he loves them; they are "precious" to him. Again, this is cause for wonder. Why would the One who is beyond the stars even pay any attention to rebel beings on this small planet? But he does, and although these particular people have broken their covenant with him time and again, he will keep his side of the bargain.

The reference to exchanging Egypt and Cush for them (43:3) has been taken by some to refer to the Persian conquest of Egypt. Thus, God will permit Cyrus and his descendants to conquer that land in return for letting his people go home. But most commentators agree that the picture is larger, and more poetic, than that.³ God is simply asserting that he is willing to pay any price to ransom his own.

In 43:5–7 the promise first made in 11:11 is reiterated: God will recover his people from all the lands where they have been taken. The special emphasis here is on "your children," a theme of special prominence in this part of the book.⁴ Would the heritage of Israel finally be cut off, as succeeding generations became increasingly mixed into the Babylonian population? Had the ancient promises to Abraham finally failed? God insists that is not the case. Even if the exiles themselves do not go home, their children, who are God's own "sons" and "daughters" (43:6), will. God's promises will not fail. He "created" Israel for his "glory," and that purpose will be realized.

Bridging Contexts

Interpreting prophecy, especially when that prophecy is couched in poetic language, as much biblical prophecy is. Some interpreters claim to interpret prophecy "literally" and insist that anyone who does not do so does not really believe the Bible. But how literally is prophecy meant to be taken? In many cases, we must confess that we do not know until after the fact. Such diffidence does not sell many books, since the public wants certainty, not

more questions. Nevertheless, it is still a fact, and it is incumbent on interpreters to recognize it.

A case in point is located here in 42:15–16. How is God going to deliver his people from Babylon? These verses make it clear, do they not? He is going to blast the mountains, dry up the Euphrates, make the sun shine in the daytime, and create a smooth highway for the blind Judeans to walk on. We can easily imagine "prophecy teachers" saying such things to the exiles. After all, that is what the Bible says.

In fact, none of those things occurred, according to Ezra and Nehemiah. Neither of the returns from Babylon was accompanied by miracles of the sort just described. So did the prophecy fail? Not at all! The Judeans *did* return home, and they did so because of Cyrus's specific act. God did act in history, as Isaiah and other prophets foretold, and did something that in the prophets' own time was called impossible. God intervened. But he did not intervene in the precise ways described in this poetic passage.

If that is so, why does the prophet use such excessive language? I believe it is because he knows he needs to move the emotions and will of a people crushed into apathy. Believe God and prepare to leave a captivity that has absorbed my whole life adjusting to it? No, that old life is over, and I might just as well give up that antique faith of mine and let it go. In such a situation, a low-key, reasoned presentation will not get the job done. Rather, the truth must be presented with a kind of emotional impact that will break past the apathetic barriers and capture the will.

Similarly, as we read prophecy not yet fulfilled today, we must be careful not to fall into this kind of trap. Will God's promises be fulfilled? Yes, by all means! And will they be fulfilled in ways that fully conform to the central affirmations being made? Yes! But will they be literally fulfilled according to all the images and figures used to express the point being made? That is another question altogether, which calls for much more modesty on the part of interpreters. Certainly literal fulfillment can be considered as a possibility. But other possibilities ought to be presented as well, all the time recognizing that one of the most important keys to interpretation is the kind of literature being dealt with. Along with this more nuanced interpretation, we must stop anathematizing those who read the significance of the imagery in different ways from our way.

The work of God in history. Throughout this part of the book Isaiah insists that God rules history and that this is one of the evidences of his Godhood. The difficulty for us today is that we do not have inspired prophets who can make those assessments for us. Is this the work of God, or is that? While some can claim to know and make large pronouncements on the basis of their supposed knowledge, the evidence is not there to support their claims. So is history still under the rule of God or not?

Yes, it is. The evidence of the Old and New Testaments is given to us to convince us of the fact so that we can live in faith in these days. The coming of Christ and the growth of the church is surely an evidence of that control. Likewise, the survival of the Jewish people in spite of all odds against such a survival is strong evidence. In recent times the defeat of the German Nazis and the Japanese militarists demonstrates his control, as does the sudden and shocking collapse of Russian communism. If the revelation of God is now complete and we lack inspired prophets to point out the specifics of God's activities, the Word of God gives us enough guidance to recognize the main outlines of his hand at work in today's history.

Contemporary Significance

TRIUMPH OVER ADVERSITY. One of the things this passage of Scripture helps us to see is the way to overcome adversity. Too often we succumb to a dualistic worldview that sees good things coming from God's hand and bad things coming from the hand of the devil. When we do that, we are slipping back into a pagan way of thinking. We see existence as a playing field where eternal good and eternal evil are using us as pawns to advance their respective causes. That is basically how the Babylonians viewed things, and it is how the Judeans were tempted to believe. That is, if more bad things happen to us than good things, it is because the bad gods are winning. So we need to do more religious things to strengthen the good gods and weaken the bad ones. That is *not* the biblical perspective.

The biblical perspective begins with God as sole Creator and Lord (43:1, 7). Nothing exists outside of him. Evil is not an eternal principle existing on its own. It is nothing other than the failure to surrender to and obey the good God. This means that nothing happens to us apart from God's will. Logically, this should lead to determinism, wherein God causes everything

to happen and we simply do what we must, for good or ill. But the Bible offers a different perspective by also presenting humans as being fully responsible for real choices.⁵

There is no fully effective middle way between these two poles. If there were, the debate over this issue would have ceased long ago. But let it simply be said here that the Old Testament is willing to live with the problem because of the complete unacceptability of the alternative: that other divine or semidivine beings can cause things to happen contrary to God's purposes.

What this means is that if there is adversity in my life, it is not there in defiance of God's control. It is helpful to think here of the concept of God's permissive will or of the idea of secondary and tertiary causation. God has made a world of cause and effect. In other words, God does not directly cause everything that happens. If I slip and put my finger in front of a moving saw blade, God does not cause me to slip, and he certainly does not independently cause the saw to cut my finger. But he certainly permits the saw to cut my finger in keeping with the ways in which he made the world.

But if God did not directly cause this event, neither did he intervene to prevent it from happening, as he could have (and perhaps does far more often than we know). Instead, he chose not to do so and permitted normal cause-and-effect principles to function. So we need not think that God specifically wills such an event to take place. However, God does permit such things to happen, and that means it is still within his control. That in turn means he can enable me to deal with it and to use it for positive purposes.

But the situation described here is more than the permissive will of God. The Hebrew people of Isaiah's prophecy have chosen to live in defiance of God's instructions for life, his *torah* or "law." Just as in the physical world, there are certain consequences of such acts. The Creator of the universe has made the universe that way. So if I find myself in adverse circumstances, I need to ask myself if I have been living in sin.

That is not a popular question today. But then it was not popular in Isaiah's or Jeremiah's day either. We do not like to believe that the way we have chosen is wrong. After all, I am doing what I want, and what I want cannot be bad, can it? But Isaiah's words come through to us: "Which of you will listen to this or pay close attention in time to come?" (42:23). Will

we be like those who, being consumed by the fire, "did not take it to heart" (42:25)? If we will admit our sin, we can admit that the trouble we are experiencing has been caused by God. And if it is caused by him, then we can turn to him to deliver us from it, or through it. If, however, the devil is the ultimate source of our trouble, there is a real question whether God can do anything about it. But if no trouble comes to us except through the hand of God and if we know that his hand is always moved by love, then we know that nothing can separate us from his love (Rom. 8:35–39).

Priority of grace. One of the fundamental principles of the kingdom of God is that his grace precedes everything else. That emphasis in Isa. 43:1–7 reminds us of this truth. This is what the serpent called into question in the Garden of Eden. He suggested that God does nothing for free. If he tells his children not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, it is not because he freely cares for them but because he is trying to protect himself. Note how the Abraham narrative begins with free, unconditional promises (12:3). If there is to be hope for the human race, it will have to come from God's side and not from ours. Once the relationship was severed by the sin of Adam and Eve, there was no way they or we could reestablish it. God's holy nature had been offended, and only he could remedy that situation. He began to do so by reaching out to Abraham and Sarah with gracious promises.

That situation continued in Egypt. Note that Sinai does not precede the Exodus. Rather, the giving of the law on Mount Sinai follows the Exodus. This fact indicates that the descendants of Jacob were not saved from Egypt by their obedience. They were delivered from that bondage by grace alone. Then, *and only then*, came the call for obedience. Obedience never produces deliverance, but gracious deliverance should issue in obedience.

That is the paradigm presented here in Isaiah. To be sure, God calls his people to listen to and believe the promises he makes to deliver them. But his grace is declared to them even before they are necessarily prepared to listen and believe. Nor is the grace presented in any way that makes it conditional on obedience. God simply announces through the prophet that he *will* deliver them. It is stated as a fact.

The most concise statement of this truth in the New Testament is found in Romans 5:8: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." That is, God did everything necessary

to deliver us from the consequences of our sin before there was any indication that we would respond to that free act. If ever there was a refutation of Satan's slander, it is there. The characteristic of the Triune God is free, self-giving love, without the slightest taint of "what's in it for me." The ultimate proof of that fact is the cross of Jesus. God comes to us in Christ offering himself to us (see comments on Isa. 53:10). There is nothing we have done or can ever do to merit such an offer. It is free.

Personal relationship with God. As I have stated elsewhere, the Bible is not unique in its concept of God as the transcendent One, nor is it unique in its claim that God is personal with the human-like qualities of caring, passion, and compassion. But what is unique is its combining of these two. Nowhere else in religious or philosophical thought do we find this combination. Like sovereignty and free will, it is logically contradictory, yet the Bible maintains it everywhere throughout its pages. The Creator is your Redeemer, but more than that, he is your Lover. His transcendence is not diminished by his passion, nor his passion by his transcendence.

That is wonderful news. If the absolute principle of this universe were unfeeling, implacable, mindless force, then our condition would be bleak indeed. It is no wonder that one of the concerns of many cosmologists is to find intelligent life elsewhere in the universe. Not only are they seeking to validate chance evolution, but they are also reacting out of the terrible loneliness that a "force" theory of origins must result in.

But the Bible tells us that there is a Person who inhabits the universe, a Person who has a deep concern for his creatures and, as amazing as it seems, wants to be known by those creatures. On the surface of it, this is astounding. What possible benefit could the Triune One possibly gain from such a relationship? God is not lonely. In himself there is perfect fellowship. But perhaps that itself is the answer to the question. He does not seek to be known by us for himself but for ourselves. Anything made in the image of God is made for fellowship, and it is made for fellowship with the ultimate Fellowship. Thus, we will be ever incomplete until we are included in that eternal Fellowship.

God acts out of concern for our well-being. He does what he does for us because he values us. He finds us "precious," we are his special heritage. In the end, of course, it was not the kingdoms of Egypt, Sheba, and Cush he

gave in exchange for us, but his own self in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ.

What this means is that biblical faith is not first of all adherence to a set of intellectual principles, nor is it the acceptance of certain behavioral dicta or the adoption of a set of moral norms. To be sure, it is all of these, but they are not what the faith is *first of all* about. Rather, it is first of all about a personal relationship with one's Creator. To some, the words "personal relationship" strikes too much of an evangelical, Protestant ring. But I would argue that a passage such as this one shows us that these words or, more to the point, this concept is not a special possession of one wing of the Christian church. Rather it is biblical, even Old Testament, in its basis.

Can it be doubted that the God who walks in the garden with Adam and Eve, who admonishes Cain, who eats supper with Abraham, who wrestles with Jacob, who speaks "mouth to mouth" with Moses, who calls Samuel by name, who offers a house to David, who shouts and weeps and sings through the prophets wants a personal relationship with people? To be sure, all of that is immensely heightened when God comes in flesh and says to ordinary people, "Come and be with me." But it is not some strange new idea. It is the culmination of what has been so throughout the Old Testament.

What is the significance of all this for today? It is to express the concern that for all too many contemporary Christians, the personal relationship side of their faith is much more theory than fact. For too many of us the passion of God for us is more of an idea than a reality. Our faith is a system of beliefs, more or less coherent, or it is a set of habits more or less followed. But to personally relate to God on a day-to-day basis is foreign to many of us. We do not read the Bible; we do not pray; we do not consciously pay attention to his voice throughout the day. That is not the way God wants it to be. We are his special treasure, and if we are to become all we can be, we need to be living in that reality.

Isaiah 43:8-44:5

⁸LEAD OUT THOSE who have eyes but are blind,

who have ears but are deaf.

⁹All the nations gather together and the peoples assemble.

Which of them foretold this and proclaimed to us the former things?

Let them bring in their witnesses to prove they were right,

so that others may hear and say, "It is true."

¹⁰"You are my witnesses," declares the LORD,

"and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he.

Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me.

¹¹I, even I, am the LORD, and apart from me there is no savior.

12I have revealed and saved and proclaimed—

I, and not some foreign god among you.

You are my witnesses," declares the LORD, "that I am God.

¹³Yes, and from ancient days I am he. No one can deliver out of my hand. When I act, who can reverse it?"

¹⁴This is what the LORD says your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "For your sake I will send to Babylon and bring down as fugitives all the Babylonians, in the ships in which they took pride. ¹⁵I am the LORD, your Holy One, Israel's Creator, your King."

¹⁶This is what the LORD says he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, ¹⁷who drew out the chariots and horses. the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick: ¹⁸"Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. ¹⁹See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland. ²⁰The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland. to give drink to my people, my chosen,

Yet you have not called upon me, O Jacob,you have not wearied yourselves for me, O Israel.

²¹the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.

²³You have not brought me sheep for burnt offerings, nor honored me with your sacrifices.

- I have not burdened you with grain offerings nor wearied you with demands for incense.
- ²⁴You have not bought any fragrant calamus for me, or lavished on me the fat of your sacrifices.
- But you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offenses.
- ²⁵"I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.
- ²⁶Review the past for me, let us argue the matter together; state the case for your innocence.
- ²⁷Your first father sinned; your spokesmen rebelled against me.
- ²⁸So I will disgrace the dignitaries of your temple, and I will consign Jacob to destruction and Israel to scorn.
- ^{44:1}"But now listen, O Jacob, my servant, Israel, whom I have chosen.
- ²This is what the LORD says—
 he who made you, who formed you in
 the womb,

and who will help you:

- Do not be afraid, O Jacob, my servant, Jeshurun, whom I have chosen.
- ³For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground;
- I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.

⁴They will spring up like grass in a meadow, like poplar trees by flowing streams.
⁵One will say, 'I belong to the LORD'; another will call himself by the name of Jacob; still another will write on his hand, 'The LORD's,' and will take the name Israel.

Original Meaning

THIS PASSAGE IS part of a larger unit, which I have identified as 42:10–44:22. The first part of this unit (42:10–43:7) dealt with the certainty of Israel's deliverance from the Babylonian captivity. This second part shows how God will use that deliverance as the evidence that he alone is God. This material can be further subdivided into 43:8–44:5, which discusses Israel's role as a witness for God, and 44:6–20, the ultimate diatribe against the helplessness of the gods.

God's Courtroom Scene (43:8–13)

ISAIAH 43:8, WHICH almost certainly refers to the servant Israel, leaves no doubt that their hope is not in themselves. They are "blind" and "deaf" (cf. also 42:18–19). They are not in a position to give ministry (as in 42:1–9) but only to receive it. They are once more called into the courtroom along with the "nations" and the "peoples" (43:9). Once more the question is put to them: What idol has "foretold this"? It is not clear what "this" refers to. It may denote the coming of Cyrus and the fall of Babylon, though commentators offer a variety of opinions. The indefiniteness of "this" may encompass the whole of God's redemptive work in the world.

Now the nations are called on to produce "witnesses" who can give evidence that any of their gods have made a prediction in the past ("the former things") that has then come true. Their silence proves that they have no such evidence. But now the One who is both judge and defendant turns to his blind and deaf servant and says, "You are my witnesses." What incredible courage on God's part to rest his case on evidence like that. It

means that God is going to have to do an amazing work on their behalf so that they can be the evidence he deserves.

Verses 10–13 relate in general terms what Israel's relationship is to God and what they know to be true if only they will open their eyes and ears. They have been called into a relationship with God whereby they will "know" (affective) and "believe" (volitional) and "understand" (cognitive) that "I am he." We have already encountered this latter phrase in 41:4, and we will see it twice more in this chapter (43:13, 25; see also 46:4; 48:12; 51:12). This is God's ultimate statement of identity. A more colloquial translation might say, "I'm the one." He is the One all society is looking for, the One who made all things, the One to whom all things will return, and therefore the only One who can save (43:11). There is no one else in his category, and the Israelite people have been called in order to experience that truth and demonstrate it to the nations of the world.

This probably explains the interesting combination of verbs in 43:12. God has not merely "revealed" truth about himself to them, nor has he merely "saved" them, nor has he merely "proclaimed" the meaning of what he has done. He has done all three together and simultaneously so that his revelation is a wholistic one, touching the whole of human personality. No one else but the Lord has done this, and the Hebrews know it. They have experienced all of this: They are "witnesses that I am God." The term translated "God" here is 'el, the more inclusive word whose cognates in the Semitic languages almost mean "deity." God is saying that he is the totality of deity, as revealed by what he has done on the earth for and through the Israelites. The conclusion in 43:13 is inescapable: There is no one who can successfully contest his will. He is "it"; there is no one else.

Promises of Deliverance (43:14–21)

In these verses God tells his people once again that he is going to deliver them from Babylon. They are witnesses to how he has delivered them in the past, and this is what they will be witnesses of in the future. Once again, relational terminology is prominent. He is "your Redeemer," "your Holy One," "your King." They are "my people, my chosen," "formed for myself." It is because of them that the almighty God will "bring down" Babylon. He is not going to deliver them merely to prove some abstract

theological point. Rather, he will deliver them, as 43:4 says, because he loves them.

But how is he going to deliver them?² Verses 16–17 invite the people to remember what he did in the Exodus. There God demonstrated his lordship over both nature and human nations. He also showed both his desire and his ability to save. But after reminding them of those facts, he suddenly says in 43:18 that they are to "forget" all that. What is going on? We can imagine people beginning to get excited over the prospect of deliverance, and they know just how God is going to do it. He will raise up a deliverer from among them, who will divide the Euphrates River so that they can cross dry-shod, and then he will bring the river back over the Babylonian army and drown them all. As humans we like everything to be predictable.

But God is not predictable like the gods. He is the Creator, who loves doing things in "new" ways (43:19). So whereas formerly he made a "way through the sea" (43:16), this time he will make a "way in the desert" (43:19). In language reminiscent of several places in the earlier part of the book (e.g., chs. 13; 32; 34; 35), God promises to transform the desert created by arrogance and false trust, the place where unclean animals live, into a place of "water" and "streams" where his "chosen" may have all their needs supplied (43:20).³ As a result, his people will bear witness to his deity; they will "proclaim my praise" (43:21).

The Present Reality (43:22–28)

Then, in ways reminiscent of what we saw several times in chapters 1–39, the prophet steps back from that glorious future for a moment to talk about present reality. That reality seems to have two foci here. Not only does Isaiah point to the unbelief that will characterize so many people during the Exile, but people are also reverting to the unbelief rampant in Isaiah's own day, for which judgment is still to come (43:28). There is an implied charge against God to which these verses are the answer, namely, that it is beside the point to talk glowingly of God's deliverance from the Exile, for it seems so unfair of God to have sent his people into exile in the first place. After all, they were assiduous about performing all the rituals God commanded, so if in fact God sent them into captivity, he is the one in the wrong.

God's answer to this charge reflects the kind of hyperbolic, ironic language that the prophets often resort to when discussing ritual and cultic

activity.⁶ Amos, for example, implied that none of Israel's sacrifices in the desert were actually to God (Amos 5:25); Jeremiah said God had no interest in the temple (Jer. 7:1–9), and Isaiah has already said that the whole thing made God sick (Isa. 1:11–15). Almost certainly the reason for this strong language is that the trap of believing cultic behavior has an automatic effect on God is such an easy one to fall into. So God says that, in fact, they have not been calling on him at all; rather, they have wearied themselves with their sacrifice (43:22; cf. Mal. 1:13). They have not really brought sacrifices to God when they did these things, and in fact God never said that he wanted such things (Isa. 43:23). What have they done? They have just piled up more and more sin until God could not bear it any more.

What are we to make of such statements? Surely God had commanded the Israelites to bring sacrifices to his altar (Lev. 1–6), and there were some severe penalties for those who did not do so or who did it in wrong ways (cf. Lev. 10:1–3). So what is Isaiah's point? He is trying to drive home the truth that in a world of transcendence, we cannot manipulate God by manipulating the physical world. The Hebrews were continually falling back into the worldview of their neighbors, in which, since the gods are a part of the cosmic system, doing something to the system does something to the gods. But God is not part of the system, and instead of the ritual having automatic effects, it was intended to symbolize a change in personal relations.

God does not have to be manipulated into forgiving us. In fact, he cannot be so manipulated. He has already done that (Isa. 43:25), and he has done it for his own sake. We have only to receive what he has done. The sacrifices were to be symbols of changed hearts and changed lives. So God truly did not want their *sacrifices*; he wanted *them*, as symbolized by the sacrifices. But many of the Israelites had succumbed to the temptation to try to keep themselves for themselves and to try to placate God, to "get him off their backs" as it were, with their sacrifices and rituals. So, in fact, all the offerings they kept bringing and all the rituals they engaged in, which they blamed God for burdening them with, were just adding to the mountain of their unconfessed sins that they kept piling on God's back.

Thus, God suggests in 43:26 that his people might want to review the "case" they are making against him. Far from being unfair because of their careful ritual, the Exile became the more necessary because of them. From

their "father" Jacob (cf. Deut. 26:5; Hos. 12:2–4) right up to the present they have continued in sin. The inevitable result is the one that occurred in 586 B.C., when God consigned "Jacob to destruction."

God's New Work (44:1–5)

BUT, AS ALWAYS in this book, destruction is not the last word God intends to speak. Once again, he implores his people to "listen." Do not rely on mechanical rituals but enter into a relationship by listening to the One who speaks, who has been speaking since the dawn of time.

Again, the appeal is to creation. If the exiled Israelites are tempted to think that God has given up on them, that their sin has become too much for him to do anything about, they should remember that God has a special interest in them. He "made" them, forming them "in the womb." If a mother cannot forget her child (cf. 49:15), God cannot forget those he created.

Just as God is strong enough to do something about their physical captivity, so he is great enough to do something about their persistent sinning. Not only has he found a way to forgive their sin without destroying the justice on which the world rests; he has also found a way to transform a proud, self-centered people, who seem incapable of giving themselves away, into those who will gladly find their central identity in their surrender to their Father. The means of that transformation is his Spirit (44:3).

Just as in the earlier occurrence in 32:15, the work of the Spirit is to enable God's people to do what they cannot. In 32:15 they could not live lives of justice and righteousness, and God promised that his Spirit would enable them to live such lives. Here the people are unable to surrender their proud self-ownership and enter into a completely committed relationship with God. But God says that when his Spirit is poured out on the "dry ground" of their "offspring," they will be glad to identify themselves as belonging to the Lord (44:5). No longer will they try to retain ownership to themselves while trying to manipulate God with sacrifices.

Bridging Contexts

WITNESSES. Jesus quoted Isaiah 43:10 when he said to his disciples "You will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8), and he was using the term in the same sense that Isaiah used it. He was calling on his disciples to give evidence

out of their own personal experience that Jesus Christ was who he said he was. They were not first of all to preach sermons but to tell what they knew to be so in life. This is also what John does in the beginning of his first letter, as he tells his readers that he has touched and seen and heard Life (1 John 1:1–3). This means that unless there is a vital, firsthand experience of Christ that has transformed the way the witness lives, there is nothing to witness to. This is demonstrated by the sons of Sceva, who were evidently trying to minister out of a secondhand knowledge of Christ in Acts 19:14–16:

Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. One day the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.

The only Savior. The point in Isa. 43:11 about God's being the only Savior seems to be a sweeping claim. But it is rooted squarely in the worldview issues that are at the center of this section and, indeed, at the center of the book, namely, that there is no salvation in paganism. The system cannot save us from the system. While one part of the system might pretend that it can save from another part, it is not true in the long run, for no part of the system is independent of any other. The result is that unless there is a Being from beyond the cosmic system who can intervene in the system at will, there is no real deliverance. We cannot be delivered from ourselves, from our past, or from the effects of our sin. All of these factors are inescapable, and we must simply make the best of them, realizing that we are all victims and victimizers.

The only "salvation" paganism, either ancient or modern, can offer is either Stoicism, which seeks to look realistically at a situation and make the best of it, or Epicureanism, which champions "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." A modern combination of these two is "self-actualization," in which I simply discover who I am and capitalize on that. But what the disciples of self-actualization do not realize is that one of the most self-actualized persons we can meet is the serial killer. If we are really

only the product of all of our conditionings and if we really have no option but to obey them, then to be "self-actualized" is to embrace all that conditioning in an iron grasp and to leap into the abyss.

The nature of biblical revelation. Isaiah 43:12 gives us a good snapshot of the process of revelation. Sometimes both the friends and the enemies of revelation agree in that they make it far too simplistic: God dictated his word to human secretaries, putting in stylistic variations just to give it some "local color." If we do not accept that picture, so we are told, then we must believe that humans originated the Bible as a fallible "witness" to a faith that is only a little different from the Canaanite religions from which it emerged.

One version of this view posits that God really has acted in human experience (revelation) but that the reports of that action are only human. The great defect of this idea is that we cannot know *whether* God acted, but only that fallible people thought he did. There is little there on which to stake one's eternal destiny. But in fact, as the Bible describes it, revelation is a more nuanced and relational process than either of these oversimplifications. The terms Isaiah uses here ("revealed," "saved," "proclaimed") lend themselves to understanding this process. The biblical material sees the following four phases in revelation, all of which are directed by God:

God intervenes in human experience.

He inspires a person or persons with the interpretation of that experience.

He superintends the recording and transmission of that interpreted report.

He applies the meaning of that interpreted report to the hearts of hearers and readers.

All of this process is revelation, and no one part of it can be cut off from the others. So God says here that both his actions ("saved") and his interpretations ("proclaimed") are part of the process by which he has "revealed" himself.

A new thing. We humans do not very much like surprises. We like to have everything neatly packaged and predictable. That is the way the gods

are. They do what they have always done; they have no choice. As representations of the cosmic system, they are fated to do the same things over and over again. The sun does not have the option of rising in the west.

But Yahweh is the Creator; he loves to do things differently. Because he is faithful, he will always be consistent with himself, so he will never be arbitrary and heartless. Yet that does not mean he must therefore always repeat himself. He will do things in new ways. The reason for calling the people's attention to the Exodus (43:16–17) and then telling them to "forget the former things" (43:18) is that God wants us to learn things about his character and nature from the past but not to enshrine the methods of the past. Tragically, we are prone to do the opposite: enshrine the methods while forgetting the theological truths they were first devised to teach.

Ritual. There are three common views of ritual in the world. (1) The pagan view is the one I call "continuity." In this view the symbol and the reality are identical. What one does to the symbol, one does to the reality. This is the principle that lies behind voodoo and all other forms of sympathetic magic. In this view I can do things here that will automatically affect the divine realm. It does not matter whether I am repentant or whether I am trusting the god. If I do the ritual right, the god must do what that ritual requires.

- (2) The second view posits a radical break between the symbol and the reality. If the first view is more Platonic, this one is more Aristotelian. The symbol is only a mental representation of the reality, so you can do whatever you want to the symbol and it will have no effect on the reality at all. This view has dominated Western thought since the eighteenth century.
- (3) But the Bible seems to take a middle way between these two. On the one hand, it is clear, as this passage testifies, that manipulating a symbol, such as a sacrifice, has no automatic effect on God. On the other hand, certain symbols have a more than casual relation with the reality they symbolize.

Some years ago a translation of the Bible got in trouble with this point. The translators reasoned that "the blood of Christ" was simply a metaphor for the death of Christ, there being nothing magic about Christ's blood. But when their translation came out with the "death of Christ" where the "blood of Christ" had been, there was a great deal of uproar—and not merely from traditionalists, who did not like to have treasured images tampered with.

Whether the critics of the translation could have expressed it or not, they were recognizing that certain symbols have greater communicative power than equal abstractions because reality is multidimensional. There is something about "blood" that speaks of sacrificial, atoning death in ways that mere "death" does not. What this means is that while we cannot treat the symbols of our faith as if they have power in and of themselves, neither can we interchange the symbols with impunity. Coke and donuts will not take the place of wine and bread in the Lord's Supper.

Contemporary Significance

WITNESSES. Many people today are terrorized by the prospect of being witnesses for Christ. They think that they must go door to door, passing out religious literature, or that they have to collar people in the bus terminal with "The Four Spiritual Laws." In part this is the result of preaching that has used guilt as a device for gaining acquiescence in the message. One expression of this terror is to attempt to justify oneself by saying, "Well, I just live my witness." But all too often this means no witness at all.

I believe the present passage can help us through some of the impasse. (1) Notice that there is no command to be witnesses here. Rather, God simply declares a fact: "You *are* my witnesses." Jesus says the same thing. The people of Israel and the disciples experienced some things that forever changed them. It was a fact. The same is true for us if we have genuinely encountered Christ in our lives. Like it or not, we have been changed. We *are* evidence of his divine, delivering, transforming power. It is not something we must do; it is something we are.

(2) Note too the incredible condescension of God in this process. To think that he would rest his claim to Godhood on the likes of the Israelites, or the disciples, or us is all but unbelievable. Yet he does it in the full knowledge of our fallibility. His witnesses then were "blind" and "deaf," and not much more could be said for the disciples or for us, and he knows all that. Still, when idols are called to bring out their witnesses, we are the ones God points to in order to support his case. What love, what dignity, what worth this act bestows on us. It told the exiles they were not cast away, and it should say the same to us. Witness is not an onerous demand but an incredible privilege.

- (3) One's witness is the expression of one's experience. The exiles were not expected to make speeches but to report what they knew to be so out of their own lives. They could report that God had indeed predicted the Exile long before the fact, going all the way back to Moses in his final address to them (cf. Deut. 4:25–31). They could report how they had persisted in sin and how God had tried again and again to woo them back to him, until there was no more hope and the Exile became inevitable. But they could also report that God had promised a deliverer and that they even knew his name: Cyrus. The day would shortly come when their final witness would be given as they walked out of the gates of Babylon. It is the same for us. The Scriptures tell us to be ready with a reason for the eternal hope we have (1 Peter 3:15). It does not have to be dramatic or attention-grabbing. It is simply our story and what that story says about the reality of Christ and his ability to save.
- (4) Finally, the concept of witness *does* require that God in Christ has done something in our lives. In Ezekiel 36, God says that the people have "profaned my name" by going into exile and making it appear that he was helpless to deliver them. If they were going to be the evidence of his unique holiness, he would have to deliver them not only from the consequences of their sin but also from the causes of it: their penchant for idolatry and the stubbornness of their hearts. That theme is at least alluded to in Isaiah 44:1–5. God in wonderful condescension deigns to rest his claim to be the sole God on the evidence of our lives. We must ask what the content of our daily walk to the witness stand really is. Are we allowing God to deliver us or not?

Remember the lessons of the past, but forget the methods of the past. Most of us have a hard time learning this lesson. It requires a flexibility, an openness, a daring that most of us do not possess. Life is a complex business. From the moment we make our entrance into the world, one painful experience after another impresses this complexity upon us. It is made clear to us that if we are to have our needs met, we must quickly find ways of managing this apparently chaotic complexity. So whenever we find something that works for us, we hang on to it with all the tenacity of a leech. There seem to be so few things that work most of the time that we treasure the ones that do. In some ways maturation is the process of accumulating things that work and discarding those that do not. In fact,

when you look at wisdom literature, that is what you see: The wise person knows what works in life and the fool does not.

Now along comes someone who says, "Let go of all those things that have worked in the past." What? Why? Because you and I are not God. The great danger of maturation is calcification. We have finally figured things out. We know what we want, and we know how to get it. The result is that we don't need faith any more. We know the questions, and we know the answers, so God, who seems to enjoy disturbing the comfortable, needs to keep his distance. Here is where God comes to us and dares us to believe him for a new thing in our lives, something that will force us to let go of some of the hard-won strings of control, daring to let God stretch our vision. This is the vision of a Caleb, who says at age eighty, "Give me this hill country [to conquer]" (Josh. 14:12).

However, this is no call for novelty for its own sake. If maturity is too often devoted to methods that have worked in the past, young people are too likely to say the opposite: "If it's new, it's right." But not everything new is right. For instance, not every contemporary praise chorus can outshine every Wesley or Watts hymn. So God introduces the new thing he is about to do by reminding the people of what the past events have taught them about him. If the new that we are proposing results in some sort of spiritual amnesia, something is wrong. It is true that the seven last words of the church are, "We've never done it that way before." But it is also true that when new methods obliterate the old truths, that is not good news, either for the church or for the lost world.

The nature of true religion. Throughout the Bible, the great danger to "true religion" is what we may loosely call *sacramentalism*, which is a substitution of religious forms for a vital, personal relationship with God. This relationship is the hallmark of biblical experience of God. From the reference to Adam and Eve's walking with God in the cool of the evening (Gen. 3:8), to Enoch's walk with God (5:22–23), to Abraham (17:1), to the Psalms (cf. Ps. 27:8), to Jesus and the disciples (Mark 3:14), to Paul's impassioned cry to know him (Phil. 3:10), to the saints around the throne in the book of Revelation (Rev. 7:9–11), biblical religion is about a personal relationship with God.

It is not surprising, then, for Micah to say that all God's requirements can be summed up in three verbs: "To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8). In the same way, Jesus sums up the scriptural requirements with one verb: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37–39).

But personal relationships are never easy to manage or to quantify. Do I love God more today than yesterday? Am I more like Christ today than the day before? It is much easier to quantify religious performance. It is much easier to say that I have rigorously confessed my sins and taken communion, or have been baptized, or have had an unbroken record of attendance at church and Sunday School, or have not missed a day of devotions in months, or have spent hours in the service of the poor. So we, like the Jews, would prefer to measure our religious attainments on the basis of religious performance than upon a daily love relationship with our Creator and Redeemer. Having performed at a fairly high standard, we then think that we have a claim on him for blessings in our lives while keeping control of our lives for ourselves.

At the same time, we cannot say that these activities have no relation to the reality that underlies them. If I say I love my wife passionately but am never home at night for weeks on end, if I never talk to her, never give her a gift, and never do what she asks me to do, you would be justified in saying that I am deluding myself. I do not love her, and there is really no relationship between us. So if I say we cannot congratulate ourselves on our great relationship with God simply because we go to church, neither dare I say that since our relationship is not performance-based, it doesn't matter whether we go to church. It does matter, but it is not the end; it is, instead, the means, and we must not confuse the two.

Life in the Spirit. There is a much more than casual relationship between Isa. 43:22–28 and 44:1–5. The problem identified in the first passage is the one we have just noted: the tendency to substitute formalism for genuine personal surrender. This was a problem throughout the Old Testament. There was a solution, but it was not in greater human effort. Many Old Testament saints had tried that road and found nothing but increased frustration. That is what Paul is testifying to in Romans 7. The solution was as it is here: God promised to pour out his Spirit on his children. That promise is for us today.

Romans 8 makes this clear. The covenant (or the law) could not solve the problem of our persistent rebellion. That self-willed, self-centered attitude that Paul calls "the flesh" (NIV, usually "the sinful nature") was too strong for the covenant. So God has made his Spirit available to everyone through God's Son, the Messiah. What will the Spirit do for us when we allow him to fill us? Isaiah spells it out in Isa. 44:4–5. He will enable us to identify with our Lord and with his people without reservation. To be "double-minded," as James describes it (James 1:8; 4:8), is to try to live partly for God and partly for myself, to be partly identified with God and partly identified with the world, to expect God's blessing while retaining the key to my heart for myself. It is not possible to resolve that conflict in our own strength. But the Spirit has come, and he will make it possible for us to say without any reservation, "I belong to the LORD" (Isa. 44:5).

Isaiah 44:6–22

⁶"This is what the LORD says— Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty:

I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.

⁷Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and lay out before me

what has happened since I established my ancient people,

and what is yet to come—yes, let him foretell what will come.

⁸Do not tremble, do not be afraid. Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago?

You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me?

No, there is no other Rock; I know not one."

⁹All who make idols are nothing, and the things they treasure are worthless.

Those who would speak up for them are blind;

they are ignorant, to their own shame.

¹⁰Who shapes a god and casts an idol, which can profit him nothing?

¹¹He and his kind will be put to shame; craftsmen are nothing but men.

Let them all come together and take their stand;

they will be brought down to terror and infamy.

and works with it in the coals; he shapes an idol with hammers, he forges it with the might of his arm. He gets hungry and loses his strength; he drinks no water and grows faint.

13 The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker; he roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses. He shapes it in the form of man, of man in all his glory, that it may dwell in a shrine.

14 He cut down cedars,

or perhaps took a cypress or oak.

He let it grow among the trees of the forest,

or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow.

¹⁵It is man's fuel for burning; some of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread.

But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it.

¹⁶Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill.

He also warms himself and says, "Ah! I am warm; I see the fire."

¹⁷From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships.

He prays to it and says,

"Save me; you are my god."

¹⁸They know nothing, they understand nothing;

their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see,

and their minds closed so they cannot understand.

¹⁹No one stops to think,
no one has the knowledge or
understanding to say,
"Half of it I used for fuel;
I even baked bread over its coals,
I roasted meat and I ate.
Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left?
Shall I bow down to a block of wood?"
²⁰He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart misleads him;
he cannot save himself, or say,
"Is not this thing in my right hand a

²¹"Remember these things, O Jacob, for you are my servant, O Israel.
I have made you, you are my servant; O Israel, I will not forget you.
²²I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist.
Return to me, for I have redeemed you."

lie?"

Original Meaning

THIS PASSAGE, THE ultimate accusation against the idols, concludes the unit of 42:10–44:22. While one further passage will address idols (46:1–7), it lacks the intensity and the air of judicial challenge that comes to its climax here. The diatribe here reflects the trajectory that has developed in the earlier ones. Initially, the case against the idol gods was focused on their inability to explain the meaning of the past and tell the future (41:21–29). In the second presentation of the case (43:8–13), another element was added: their inability to save their people or prevent Yahweh from saving his

people from them. Now in this third presentation, although their inability to predict the future takes first place (44:7–8), it is quickly succeeded by their inability to save, and that issue takes up the rest of the case.

The statement of the case begins in 44:6–8 with another claim to absolute uniqueness by God. The body of the charges is presented in 44:9–20. Finally, 44:21–22 forms the conclusion by issuing a call for Israel to take to heart all that this means for what their God can, and will, do for them. Like the other presentations of the case against the idols, this one has an "evangelical" function. It is not a cool philosophical discourse but attempts to convince apathetic, discouraged people not to put their hopes in things that will ultimately fail them; they must wait confidently and expectantly for what the one God, the Creator, their Holy One, will do for them.

God's Absolute Uniqueness (44:6–8)

In words and phrases that are now familiar to anyone working straight through the book, Yahweh declares his absolute uniqueness. But he first identifies himself inextricably with Israel. Although he is the only God, "the first and the last," he is also the One who has made himself known in the context of a relationship with a small, insignificant people. The gods cannot explain why he has done this nor where the relationship is going to go in the future. But God has, and the people of Israel are "witnesses" to that fact (44:8). In an always changing, unstable world, there is One who does not change, a "Rock" to which beaten, battered people may cling.

Charges Against the Idols (44:9–20)

IN CONTRAST TO this Rock, what do the other peoples of earth have to cling to? Nothing. They "treasure" worthless things, trash, and as a result have become "nothing" themselves (44:9). This thought is developed further in a general way in 44:10–11. The gods are nothing because they are made by human "craftsmen." Such gods must fail their worshipers, putting them to "shame" and thereby making the worshipers as valueless as the things worshiped. Once again (see comments on 40:18–20 and 43:8–13) the question is: How can something made by humans ever save humans?

In 44:12–17 the prophet describes the process of making idols in great detail, showing how difficult it is to make one's own gods when the true God can be so easily found. Isaiah takes us backward through the complex

process, beginning with the last step of plating the wooden form with precious metal (v. 12). Then he describes how the carpenter made the wooden form (v. 13). Next he describes the process of choosing the wood for the form (v. 14). In all of this he describes the difficulty and the complexity of the process.

In 44:15–17 Isaiah comes to the heart of his argument. When the idol maker cuts down a tree for the form of his god, he also uses some of that same tree for firewood! How in the world, the prophet asks, can a piece of wood, another part of which has been used to cook food and supply warmth, ever be expected to save a person, especially when so much human effort has had to be lavished on it to make it what it is? The answer is, of course, that it cannot do so, and anyone who thinks it can has been mentally and spiritually blinded (44:18).

The ultimate seriousness of paganism and its consequences is seen in 44:19–20. God hates the thing that has reduced humans to "nothing," that has destroyed their power to think logically. So it is not mere hyperbole when he calls the idols an "abomination" (NIV "detestable thing," v. 19). In the Old Testament an "abomination" (to'ebah) is a violation of God's creation order. It is to use a created thing in a way that violates its character. That is surely the case with idolatry. God has given all of nature to humans to care for in a way that will produce blessing (Gen. 1:28–30). For us to elevate nature to the place of God and bow down to that which was made for us is just such a violation. Spiritually speaking, it is to feed "on ashes" (Isa. 44:20).

A Call to Take Heart (44:21–22)

THESE TWO VERSES give us God's appeal to his people on the basis of what he has just said. They have not made their God; rather he has "made" them. Therefore, he is no prisoner of creation, and they need not be either. If they will "remember" all that he has been, is, and will be, they need not fear that he will "forget" them. Nor do they need to fear that their sins have become irremovable aspects of their fate. God is not bound by fate; if he determines to forgive their "offenses" and to redeem them from their captivity, he will find a way to do those things. There is nothing that can stop him (cf. 43:13).

ACCESS TO TRUTH. The forcefulness of the language used here and elsewhere in Isaiah in reference to idol worship strikes our modern ears harshly. This is because we have come to the place where harsh language is tolerated only when it is directed against intolerance. In the modern West, intolerance and politically incorrect speech are the only sins left. And intolerance is defined in the widest terms possible: believing that someone else is wrong. We have lost all confidence that anything is true in the realm of ultimate meaning. What you believe is just as likely to be true as what I believe; therefore, how dare either of us criticize the other? I may adhere to any strange creed I wish as long as I do not insist you should believe it.

What has happened is this: For the first fifteen hundred years of Christendom the church maintained the authority to determine what was right and wrong. Then for the next three hundred years the Bible was the authority. Then the Enlightenment replaced the Bible with reason. Now we have lost faith in reason's ability to show us the truth. This means that each person now determines truth for himself or herself, but with one major caveat. Anything that society determines demeans the absolute worth and freedom of any individual will be attacked with draconian energy.

So, to use modern parlance, where is Isaiah "coming from"? How can he speak so forcefully about someone else's cherished beliefs? He can do so because he believes that he has access to "the truth." That is the critical question. Does he have access to such truth, or is his "truth" of no more value than that of the Canaanites or the Babylonians? If the latter is true, then we must hang our heads for him and tell him to "pipe down." If, however, he does know the truth, then he must not keep silent. Should a person who knows that a highway bridge has collapsed a few miles ahead keep silent? That would be criminal neglect. Such a person has an obligation to warn everyone he can of the danger they are facing.

So the overriding issue in all of this is whether the "truth" about life, its meaning, and its purpose can be known. And if so, by what means is that knowing possible? If, however, life is without meaning, then that is the end of the discussion. "Right" and "wrong" are meaningless terms that should be expelled from our vocabulary. Yet the most avid secularist is not willing to give up such terms, especially when he or she feels "rights" have been violated. We *do* think some things are so, so the question is: How do we know them? The answer given everywhere today is: experience. Our

experience, individual and collective, teaches us that certain things are so. However, beyond some broad generalities, everyone's experience is different. So it is impossible to say that there are particular principles that are true for everyone.

But before we go very far down that road, we should look at the five thousand years of human history that have preceded us. When unaided human experience has been made the means for discovering "truth," the results have been markedly similar around the world. I have already talked about them at various places in this commentary, but let me recap them briefly: The world is divine; all physical-psycho-social forces are gods; conflict is eternal; sexuality is the life force; sympathetic magic is the means of manipulating and identifying with the gods; all ethics are relative (though since no society can exist for long without certain ethical norms, the ethics a given society deems effective will have to be enforced with coercion); all time is cyclical; progress is an illusion; individuals are only of value as they are a part of the larger whole of humanity, but humanity itself is of no particular value. The history of the human race tells us that this is where the theory of knowledge the Western world now espouses will lead us. Is that really where we want to go?

The only viable alternative to that theory of knowledge is the one offered in the Bible. Again we have talked about it elsewhere: It is the principle of revelation. Truth is mediated to us from beyond ourselves. It is mediated by both language and action as God, who transcends us in every particular, intersects us in our own context.

This mode of knowledge has led to some startlingly different conclusions about reality. There is one transcendent Creator of the universe, who is a personal Spirit. He created the universe freely and joyously as an expression of his own creative love. Humans, and indeed, individual humans, are an expression of his character and nature and are thus of the highest value to him. Since he is transcendent, he cannot be manipulated by sympathetic magic. He can only be identified with through the means of personal relationship he makes available to us. Since he is the one Creator and is utterly consistent, the world has a purpose and a goal. That in turn means it is possible to determine what is effective in reaching that goal and what is not effective. This also means that it is possible to keep track of progress toward that goal. There is thus an absolute ethic that is rooted in

the very nature of things, which, when followed, brings blessing to the human race and which, when denied, brings disaster.

This is where Isaiah is coming from. And it is the same place that Jesus Christ was coming from when he said to Nicodemus, "I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man" (John 3:12–13). Jesus was claiming to have direct access to the truth. More than that, he was claiming to be the means of that truth's being revealed to the world. This is where the passion of an Isaiah and a Jesus come from: the conviction that the truth about nature and life has been revealed to us and that we can then speak with assurance about the right ways to live and the wrong ways. That is what is at issue in a passage like this.

Contemporary Significance

Confronting and shaping our age. The challenge that a passage like this places before contemporary Christians, especially young Christians, is whether we will confront our age as directly as Isaiah and the rest of the prophets of Israel did. Young people are under terrific pressure to conform to the dominant culture of the day. Part of that pressure comes from within. How do I differentiate myself from my parents (a necessary step if maturity is to occur)? The immediate tendency is simply to reject everything about my parents—the way they think, the way they dress, the preferences they have—and to adopt whatever is new and current.

But this internal pressure has been dramatically reinforced from outside by the collapse of American culture that has occurred with increasing speed since the 1960s. Young people have been encouraged to look at the past, and particularly at their parents, with contempt. They have been encouraged to flaunt their defiance of all authority as though authority in itself is an evil. The ethics without which no society can exist (as best epitomized in the Ten Commandments) are consciously attacked in popular music, and music critics rush to laud the "provocative honesty" of the "artists," while all the time the "artists" are laughing. All they intended was to be outrageous and shocking in as rude a fashion as possible.

In this atmosphere, it is imperative that Christian young people be willing to be marked men and women. On the one hand, they need to temper the internal pressure to negate everything of their parents. They need to look critically and yet appreciatively at these persons who gave them life. This is surely why the fifth commandment was given in the first place. If it was the easy, natural thing to honor one's parents, no commandment would have to be given. It is because it is so easy to dishonor one's parent that a commandment was necessary. So if the Christendom of one's parents is full of inconsistencies, that does not mean the whole thing should be dispensed with. Do it better by the grace of God. Bring it back to the Bible and to the authority of God. The children of the exiles in Babylon had the opportunity to trust God in ways that would put their parents' little faith to shame, and by the grace of God they did it. Let the children of Christian parents today do the same thing and go beyond their parents' faith.

On the other hand, let Christian young people today refuse to bow to the false gods of this world just as believers did in Babylon 2,700 years ago. The meaninglessness and pointlessness of life in a world where the transcendent God has been shut out is vividly portrayed in all the media today. We are already reaping the bitter fruits of the view that this world is all there is. Can things made with human hands save us from ourselves today any more than they could then? Not in the least. So the god and goddess of unlimited sex, the god of power through wealth, the god of alcoholic gaiety, and the goddess of beauty must all be rejected by Christians today as we seek the face of the one God more than anything else. He alone can redeem us from the dungeons in which those other gods will abandon us at the end of the day.

This will require increasing courage and the willingness to be rejected and ultimately disenfranchised. Unless our society undergoes a major revival, Christians will soon be seen as the enemy of the state. But God is writing our history and no one else, so we can dare to be different, and in so doing continue to be lights for the truth so that others lost in the dark can find their way home to the Father.

Isaiah 44:23-45:13

23SING FOR JOY, O heavens, for the LORD has done this; shout aloud, O earth beneath.
Burst into song, you mountains, you forests and all your trees, for the LORD has redeemed Jacob, he displays his glory in Israel.

24"This is what the LORD says your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb:

I am the LORD, who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself,

25who foils the signs of false prophets and makes fools of diviners,
who overthrows the learning of the wise and turns it into nonsense,
26who carries out the words of his servants and fulfills the predictions of his messengers,

who says of Jerusalem, 'It shall be inhabited,'
of the towns of Judah, 'They shall be built,'
and of their ruins, 'I will restore them,'

27who says to the watery deep, 'Be dry, and I will dry up your streams,'

28who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd

and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, "Let it be rebuilt," and of the temple, "Let its foundations be laid."

45:1"This is what the LORD says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of

to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armor,

to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut:

²I will go before you and will level the mountains;

I will break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron.

³I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places,

so that you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel, who summons you by name.

⁴For the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen,

I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honor, though you do not acknowledge me.

⁵I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God.

I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me,

⁶so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting men may know there is none besides me. I am the LORD, and there is no other. ⁷I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.

8"You heavens above, rain down righteousness; let the clouds shower it down. Let the earth open wide, let salvation spring up, let righteousness grow with it; I, the LORD, have created it.

⁹"Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker. to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, 'What are you making?' Does your work say, 'He has no hands'? ¹⁰Woe to him who says to his father, 'What have you begotten?' or to his mother, 'What have you brought to birth?' 11"This is what the LORD says the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker: Concerning things to come, do you question me about my children. or give me orders about the work of my hands?

¹²It is I who made the earth and created mankind upon it.
My own hands stretched out the heavens; I marshaled their starry hosts.
¹³I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness: I will make all his ways straight.

He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free, but not for a price or reward, says the LORD Almighty."

Original Meaning

As WITH 42:10–44:22, the next section (44:23–46:13) appears to me to be a two-part unit introduced by a call to praise, in which the plan of God involving his servants (44:23–45:13) is followed by a declaration of God's absolute superiority over the idols (45:14–46:13). I will discuss the two parts separately, but I believe the basic line of thought continues throughout.

In 44:23–45:13, God reveals the name of the person who will be his "anointed" to deliver his people from the Babylonian exile. After the opening call to praise (44:23), the prophet celebrates God's power to do as he wishes, concluding with the announcement of Cyrus's name (44:24–28). Then follows God's commission to Cyrus (45:1–8). Finally, in response to an apparent challenge to the appropriateness of using a pagan in this way, God asserts that he has a perfect right to do this if he chooses (45:9–13). Hanson points out the prominence of first-person pronouns and verbs referring to God in the section.² Although the naming of Cyrus is the dramatic center, the passage is about God, not Cyrus.

A Call to Praise (44:23)

THIS VERSE FUNCTIONS as a transition between the former unit and the following one, just as 42:10–17 did. It is a call to praise, in which the "heavens" and the "earth," which at the beginning of the book were called to witness Israel's rebellion (1:2), are now called to rejoice over the salvation promised in 44:21–22 and revealed with more clarity in 44:24–45:7. The rest of nature ("mountains," "forests," and "trees") is then commanded to join in the song of redemption. In this visual (and auditory) way, Isaiah emphasizes again that the Creator of the world is the only One who can redeem the world. Also, nature, in whom God's creative "glory" is seen, is called upon to praise God for his greater redemptive "glory" that will be displayed "in Israel." Truly his glory fills the earth (cf. 6:3).

God's Redemptive Plans (44:24–28)

THE "REDEEMER" NOW SPELLS out in the greatest detail yet what his redemptive plans are. Here he names the "one from the east" (41:2) who will be Israel's savior. Furthermore, he specifies why Jerusalem will have good tidings to share with the surrounding towns (cf. 40:9). The man's name is "Cyrus," the Persian king who will conquer Babylon and who will see to it that Jerusalem's temple is rebuilt (44:28).

But the naming of Cyrus is only the final act in a long list. As the punctuation in the NIV shows, 44:24–28 comprises a single sentence consisting of a succession of participles that define "I am the LORD" in 44:24.³ Here God identifies himself and demonstrates his lordship by what he does. He is the Creator, who "made" everything, stretching out "the heavens" and spreading out "the earth." He is the Lord of history (44:25–26a), revealing what he is doing to "his servants" the prophets and making "fools" of those who try to predict the future by means of magical continuities. He is the Redeemer (44:26b–28), who is able to rebuild the ruined "Jerusalem" and its surrounding towns.⁴ Because he is the Creator and the Lord of history and the Redeemer, he is even able to use a pagan emperor to accomplish his purposes.

The Commission of Cyrus (45:1-8)

CYRUS NOW RECEIVES his commission from God. He is specifically said to be God's "anointed" or Messiah (45:1). The victories that will come to him will be gifts from God's hand (45:1–3). They will not be his own accomplishments but will come from God for two purposes: that Cyrus himself might know that Yahweh, "the God of Israel," is "the LORD," and that his work in history might be done "for the sake of Jacob my servant."

Twice is it said that God has called Cyrus "by name." This underlines the importance of the naming of Cyrus as an act of predictive prophecy. Isaiah has repeatedly insisted that God alone can tell the future and that the attempts to do so by the devotees of the gods only make them look like "fools" (44:25). His ability to name the deliverer far in advance is the climactic demonstration of this fact. If we deny the obvious predictive claim that Isaiah of Jerusalem is making and instead posit some unknown person simply declaring after the fact that Cyrus was God's man, we have made this unknown prophet deny the very thing he claims. God has, then,

not named the deliverer in advance and the prophet knows it. That is not great theology; it is misrepresentation of the facts.⁶

One of the evidences of God's lordship is that he knows the name of one who does not know God's name (45:4–5). Even if Cyrus has never heard of Yahweh of Israel, Yahweh knows about Cyrus even before he is born. It is neither the Persian Ahura-mazda nor the Babylonian Marduk who rules the world of time and space, but Yahweh. The statement that Cyrus will recognize this eventually is an interesting one, and depending on how the identity of Darius in the book of Daniel is resolved, that book may give evidence of the realization of the promise (cf. Dan. 6:26–27). At the same time, Cyrus's acknowledgment that he was called by the Lord to release his people (cf. Ezra 1:2) may be as much as this statement intends for him to do.

This segment ends much as the previous one (Isa. 44:23–28) began: with a declaration of the absolute uniqueness of God (45:5–8). There is none like him, and his goal is that people all over the world will recognize his uniqueness. Three different times the Lord makes the statement that there is no other god than he (45:5–6).

This is all summed up in 45:7 with its dramatic statement that nothing on earth occurs apart from him. In this assertion Isaiah is denying the pagan understanding that good and evil (or light and dark) are two eternally coexistent principles battling in the universe. There is only one first principle, and he is light and good. If darkness and evil exist, they do so because the one God permits them to exist. In that sense, he is responsible for their existence.⁸

But if the thought ended here, we might conclude that God has a kind of neutral position on the direction of the world. Verse 8 shows that is not the case. God does care passionately about the direction his creation takes. He expects that "right" (understood as an expression of his own character) will prevail and that "salvation" (in the sense of deliverance from all the effects of evil) will rule. That is what he "created" the earth for.

God As Sole Creator and Redeemer (45:9-13)

BUT DOES GOD have a right to do such a thing as he has just promised? Does he have the right to use someone who does not even know him to save his believing people? This section answers such questions. God asserts that

as the sole Creator and Redeemer he does have the right to do this. Here we recall the admonition of 43:18 to forget the former things. That would not have been easy for that faithful remnant, whose very life had come to center on the study of the Scriptures (as seems to be the case during the Babylonian exile). Surely if God were going to raise up a deliverer for them, it would be someone like Moses, a man who knew and loved the Lord and through whom God could reveal himself to his people.⁹

But God responds to this idea with strong words. He pronounces doom ("woe," 45:9–10) on those who challenge the rightness of his activity. He compares it to a pot criticizing the way the potter makes it, or a baby saying to its parents that it does not approve of being born in this way. We may ask why the response is so strong.

In fact, just as the predictions of the future become more specific throughout chapters 40–48, so do the challenges to the hearers. The strongest of all can be found in chapter 48. If the exiles will not let God deliver them in his own way, they have not learned the lesson of his lordship. He is still their "God in a box," to do with as they choose. So in 45:11–12 God once more asserts that he is not only Israel's "Holy One" and "Maker," but also the Maker of the whole cosmos and the Creator of all "mankind." If he does not have a right, as an expression of his own "righteousness," to set his "exiles free" (45:13) as he chooses, who does?

Bridging Contexts

"I AM THE LORD." This phrase is repeated four times in the first two stanzas of this unit (44:24; 45:3, 5, 6). In one sense, the whole Bible is about humans coming to know who "the LORD" is. From the Exodus, where knowing who the Lord is was a central purpose of the plagues and Israel's deliverance, to Leviticus, where his identity is the basis of his commandments, to Kings, where Elijah demonstrates who the Lord is on Mount Carmel, to Ezekiel, where the phrase occurs more than sixty-five times, the true identity of God is central.

This phrase is complicated for us in English because it is not immediately clear to us that "the LORD" is actually an English substitution for God's personal name in Hebrew, which was probably, though not certainly, pronounced "Yahweh." So the statement is, "I am Yahweh." "I am Yahweh"

suggests rulership, absolute sovereignty, and the like. But what does "you will know that I am Yahweh" mean? If we have reconstructed the name correctly, the name is a verbal sentence meaning "he causes [everything] to be." That is, he is the origin, the foundation, the basis, and the end of all things. To know that God is all these and to know that he is these things for me personally changes everything. He is not merely my Lord; he is my everything, including the next breath that I take.

This is why the New Testament statement of faith is so shocking. Who is Jesus Christ? He is the "Lord" (Rom. 10:9–10)! The Old Testament said that the Hebrew people would know their God is Yahweh on the basis of his delivering them from Egypt and Babylonia (Exodus and Ezekiel) and on the basis of his moral character being worked out in their lives (Leviticus). The New Testament says the same things for every person who has ever lived when it says that we will know Jesus is Yahweh when he delivers us from our sin and plants the character of the Father in us by making the Holy Spirit available to us.

Challenge to unbelief. When we think of the sharp challenge here to those who question God's ways, we also think of Jesus' challenges to the Pharisees. Unquestionably some of the harshest words in the Bible come out of Jesus' mouth in talking to this group of people. When we think about this phenomenon, it seems a bit strange. After all, the Pharisees were some of the most devout Jews in the country. If we imagine that some of them were cold and priggishly self-righteous, we must think that there were many others who were sincerely trying to serve God with their whole hearts, such as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. The Pharisees were not like the Sadducees, who were mostly devoted to furthering their own power and positions. Oddly, as far as the Gospels are concerned, Jesus has almost nothing to say to the Sadducees.

What should we make of this phenomenon in Isaiah and Jesus? While we cannot be dogmatic, perhaps the reason is that it is precisely those who are most faithful who are in the greatest danger of "putting God in a box" and thus limiting what he can do in and through them. The flagrant sinner either ignores God altogether or in despair invites God to do "whatever" to address the crisis of his or her soul. Superficial believers have only an academic interest in God. They have been inoculated with just enough religion to ensure that they are far from contracting the real thing. But it is

those who are passionate about their faith who stand in the greatest danger. They have such great possibilities, yet if they cannot break beyond the limitations that their own study and involvement have placed on them, all those possibilities will be lost.

A football coach once said to a group of us players, "If I stop yelling at any of you, start worrying, because that will mean I have given up on you." Maybe that is what is going on here and in the ministry of Jesus. Perhaps it is precisely because there are such great possibilities for either truth or error that God addresses these people so harshly and directly. They need to be shaken out of their dangerous confidence that they know the almighty Creator so well that they can tell him what he is going to do next.

Contemporary Significance

MODERN PHARISEES. We as evangelical Christians need to be careful that we do not fall into the trap the Pharisees did. We also need to be careful that we do not automatically, and wrongly, exclude ourselves from that group. The law and grace debate might lead us in that direction. If we say that a Pharisee is someone who believes that he or she can make himself or herself acceptable to God by right behavior, then most of us evangelicals can immediately assume that we are not of that group. After all, we are those who follow the Reformation creed of *sola gratia*—grace alone. We know that none of us brings anything in our hands when we kneel at the cross. So that means we could not possibly be grouped with the Pharisees.

But suppose we expand the definition of "Pharisee" to those who are passionate students of Scripture, who are zealously concerned to know and please God? What then? Would not many of us fall into that category? I believe that is a more appropriate definition, at least for our purposes here. It was people who zealously studied the Scriptures who could not believe that Jesus could be the promised Messiah. It was people who wanted to please God who could not accept his friendship with notorious sinners. It was people who had almost made a life's work of studying God's ways who could not allow Jesus to deliver people in ways that seemed to violate how God was supposed to act. We may say that they had not studied the Scriptures well enough or that they were more concerned about justifying God's ways to themselves than they were about applying them to human

hearts. But the question here is whether that behavior is descriptive of me and whether the strong words of Isaiah and Jesus might be directed at me.

Inclusivism. I commented in the previous unit on the pressure for tolerance in the modern world. This unit lends itself to further discussion of that point. If we were to apply today's postmodern thinking to the Judean experience in captivity, what would we have expected them to say the experience had taught them? Surely it would go like this:

- 1. Let us repent of our sinful idolatry in insisting that our god is the only god.
- 2. Let us welcome the evidence of the pervasiveness of the Divine as seen in the Babylonian religion and in the other religions we have encountered.
- 3. Let us admit that other expressions of faith are as good as, and in some cases better than, our narrow conceptions.
- 4. Let us admit that our god is nothing other than one more flawed attempt (and more flawed than most) to encapsulate the All.

But, as a matter of fact, what we get from Isaiah precisely counters that. It is:

- 1. Our sin is in not insisting firmly enough on God's absolute uniqueness.
- 2. What the Babylonians call "gods" are not gods at all; they are the product of human ingenuity applied to this world.
- 3. These "gods" do not know where we came from or where we are going, but ours does and he has told us!
- 4. Our God is *not* the All—he is distinctly Other than us and our experience.

Isaiah is concerned that the experience of the Exile will *not* make the Judeans more "inclusive." He would share that same concern for us today. This is not the time to dilute our faith and admit that other faiths "contain a

lot of the truth too." Would Isaiah say that about the religion of Canaan or Babylon? No! This is not to say that every concept in the non-Christian religions is wrong or perverse. As C. S. Lewis says, if the resurrection is true, then we ought not to be surprised to find the dying and rising god motif in the pagan religions. But that does not mean the fertility religions are true; it means Christianity is true! It may well mean that the proponent of the fertility religion will be better prepared to accept the truth of Christ's resurrection. But what we should never say to that person is, "See, you have a faith in resurrection, too. You are already a believer." Christians do not believe in resurrection; we believe in the resurrection of Christ, and there is a vast difference between the two.

This is not to say that we may therefore be rude or vicious in our contacts with persons of other faiths or of no faith. We must value them as creations of the Father and as persons for whom Christ died. The grace in which we stand gives us no grounds for feelings of superiority or for patronizing those who have not yet responded to the grace that has been extended to them. Christ's command to love our neighbors does not only apply to believing neighbors. But that command to love them does not mean that we must confirm them in the error that is destroying them. It is interesting that some of those who argue most strongly for inclusivism would be the first to argue forcefully with a cigarette smoker that what he or she is doing is deadly and should be stopped at once. So exclusivism in the realm of the physical is perfectly acceptable. It is only in the realm of the spiritual that it is seen as an expression of intolerance.

Isaiah 45:14-46:13

¹⁴THIS IS WHAT the LORD says:

"The products of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush, and those tall Sabeans—they will come over to you and will be yours; they will trudge behind you, coming over to you in chains. They will bow down before you and plead with you, saying, 'Surely God is with you, and there is no other; there is no other god.'"

15Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God and Savior of Israel.
16All the makers of idols will be put to shame and disgraced; they will go off into disgrace together.
17But Israel will be saved by the LORD with an everlasting salvation; you will never be put to shame or disgraced, to ages everlasting.

18For this is what the LORD says—
he who created the heavens,
he is God;
he who fashioned and made the earth,
he founded it;
he did not create it to be empty,
but formed it to be inhabited—
he says:

"I am the LORD, and there is no other.

¹⁹I have not spoken in secret, from somewhere in a land of darkness;

I have not said to Jacob's descendants, 'Seek me in vain.'

I, the LORD, speak the truth; I declare what is right.

²⁰"Gather together and come; assemble, you fugitives from the nations.

Ignorant are those who carry about idols of wood,

who pray to gods that cannot save.

²¹Declare what is to be, present it let them take counsel together.

Who foretold this long ago, who declared it from the distant past?

Was it not I, the LORD?

And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me.

²²"Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.

²³By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked:

Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear.

²⁴They will say of me, 'In the LORD alone are righteousness and strength.'"

All who have raged against him will come to him and be put to shame.

- ²⁵But in the LORD all the descendants of Israel will be found righteous and will exult.
- ^{46:1}Bel bows down, Nebo stoops low; their idols are borne by beasts of burden.
- The images that are carried about are burdensome, a burden for the weary.
- ²They stoop and bow down together; unable to rescue the burden, they themselves go off into captivity.
- 3"Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all you who remain of the house of Israel,
- you whom I have upheld since you were conceived,
 - and have carried since your birth.
- ⁴Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you.
- I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.
- 5"To whom will you compare me or count me equal?
 - To whom will you liken me that we may be compared?
- ⁶Some pour out gold from their bags and weigh out silver on the scales;
- they hire a goldsmith to make it into a god, and they bow down and worship it.
- ⁷They lift it to their shoulders and carry it; they set it up in its place, and there it stands.

From that spot it cannot move.

Though one cries out to it, it does not answer;
it cannot save him from his troubles.

8"Remember this, fix it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels.
9Remember the former things, those of long ago;

I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me.

10I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come.

I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.

¹¹From the east I summon a bird of prey; from a far-off land, a man to fulfill my purpose.

What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do.

¹²Listen to me, you stubborn-hearted, you who are far from righteousness.

13I am bringing my righteousness near, it is not far away; and my salvation will not be delayed.
I will grant salvation to Zion, my splendor to Israel.

Original Meaning

THESE VERSES (the second part of 44:23–46:13) sum up the case for God's superiority over the idols. The first segment (45:14–25) contrasts God's ability to save with that of the idols in a general way. The second (46:1–7) continues this contrast in much more concrete imagery. In both of these the

theme of "carrying" is prominent. In the final section (46:8–13), Isaiah calls on his hearers to take all this to heart and not to give up hope that God will deliver them.

God's Ability to Save (44:14–25)

THIS SEGMENT OPENS with a picture of people from the ends of the earth coming humbly to Israel, admitting that Israel's God is the only God (45:14). The next three verses offer some reflection on this picture. The gods of the idol makers will fail them and leave them in "disgrace" as they "go off" into captivity (45:16). But God's people will not be "disgraced," for the opposite thing will happen to them: They will be "saved" from captivity (45:17).

Verses 18–19 give the reason why this affirmation can be made: God is the sole Creator of the universe, and he created it for a purpose. That purpose, as revealed in his promises to "Jacob's descendants," is a saving one. Though he may be hidden in his transcendent essence (cf. 45:15), he is anything but hidden in his desire for relationship with his human creatures. He has revealed this desire as he has "spoken" to them again and again, inviting them to "seek" him (45:19).²

After this introduction, the idol makers are once more called to present themselves before God (45:20). But their description here is unusual. They are the "fugitives from the nations" (as in 45:14). In other words, the discussion has proceeded to the point where the idols are now seen as having failed, and their worshipers know this. So they come into the assembly carrying their useless images. In 45:21 the Lord once again asks who predicted this situation, and the answer is that he alone has done so. Thus, he is the only God.

What follows next is surprising. We might expect words of judgment, as in 44:9–20, but instead we have an invitation to these people from the "ends of the earth" to "turn" to the Lord "and be saved." This expresses God's ultimate purpose in the conflict with the idols. He does not want to destroy the idol makers but to save them. As with Israel, his ultimate purpose in judgment is not destruction but redemption. If he is the only God, then he is also the only Savior. And if he created the world and humanity in it for good, then he is the One to whom all persons must eventually turn if they are to realize the purpose of their lives. But, as Childs remarks,³ this is not a

blanket offer of universal salvation. There are those who accept God's offer and come, and there are those who refuse to come. "Shame" and defeat will be the lot of the latter.

Illustration of God As the Only Savior (46:1–7)

THE THEME OF God as the only Savior is now graphically illustrated. Those who have depended on the Babylonian gods "Bel" and "Nebo" load their idol gods onto oxcarts, to be "carried" off "into captivity" (46:1–2). The worshipers, instead of being saved by their gods, have to save the gods! In an especially poignant rejoinder, God reminds his people that he is the One who has "carried" (46:3) them ever since their conception in the womb, and he promises to continue to carry them through their "old age" (46:4). He is their Maker and will carry them.

The alternative is spelled out in 46:5–7. If people choose to make their own gods, they will have to carry what they have made. When they put the god down, it will not move an inch from where it is put. Would we compare the Maker and only Savior of the world to that? Surely not!

Final Appeal to Idol Worshipers (46:8–13)

THESE VERSES CONSTITUTE the final summation and appeal in the disputation with the idols. The case has been presented several times, moving from the inability of the idols to explain the past or tell the future to their inability to save those who worship them. Now God calls on his people to make their decision. Will they give up their ancient biblical faith and be sucked down into the "black hole" of paganism, or will they refuse to succumb to their sense of discouragement and despair and instead reaffirm their confident hope in God and in his promises to deliver them?

They are to remember that in "former" times God predicted what is taking place at this moment and that he has kept his promises in the past. Cyrus, "the bird of prey" coming "from the east," will arrive in direct fulfillment of the prediction and purpose of God. These things show that Yahweh is God alone and that "there is none like" him. The issue now is whether the exiles will believe it and keep their faith through forty-five dark, uncertain years so that when Cyrus is revealed, there will still be a remnant who can reach out and take hold of God's hand. God's "righteousness" in keeping his promises is about to be revealed. At that

time will there be any left who have been righteous (done the right thing) by believing God (cf. Gen. 15:6)?

Bridging Contexts

THE ONLY SAVIOR OF THE WORLD. Isaiah 45:22–25 reminds us of the New Testament appropriation of the Saviorhood of God. Paul says of Jesus the very things that are said of Yahweh here, that every knee will bow and every tongue will swear allegiance to him (Phil. 2:10–11). How can Paul say such a thing? It is because he has become convinced that Jesus is the way in which God will manifest his world-saving power. It is in and through Jesus Christ that persons will be able to say that "in the LORD alone are righteousness and strength" (Isa. 45:24).

The identity of Yahweh and Jesus was the core of Paul's preaching immediately after his conversion (Acts 9:20) and continued to be at the heart of his thought for the rest of his life (cf., e.g., Titus 2:13; 2 Tim. 4:1). That he applies this passage, with its strong affirmation, "I am God, and there is no other" (Isa. 45:22), to Christ is a clear indication of how deeply the truth of Jesus' deity grasped him.

It is sometimes argued that the missionary thrust of Christianity has been imposed on the more ethnically based Old Testament faith. To be sure, that faith is ethnically based. That was the only way to ensure that it was passed on effectively from one generation to another. This is why Moses was so insistent that the Torah of God be taught to one's children and lived out and reflected upon in their presence on a daily basis (Deut. 6:6–9). But from the outset, it was not exclusively ethnic. The place of the foreigner or alien was a special one in the Israelite community. Any "strangers" who wished to join the community could do so if they took on themselves the obligations of Torah. For males this meant circumcision, but females were welcome too, as the book of Ruth demonstrates.

Solomon's dedicatory prayer for the temple shows this same truth. That building was to be a house of prayer for all nations. The statements of Isaiah and Micah about all the nations coming to Jerusalem to learn Torah carry this idea forward (2:1–4; Mic. 4:1–3). And while it is possible that Jesus' remark about the Pharisees going around the world to make one proselyte may denote their attempt to recruit other Jews to the outlook of

the Pharisees, it may also refer to an attempt to bring Gentiles into the Jewish faith. Thus, although the Old Testament faith was ethnically based, it was by no means exclusively so.

The arguments we have seen in the last several chapters of Isaiah help us to see why this worldwide outreach of biblical religion would come to pass. If indeed Yahweh is the only God of the whole world and its sole Creator, if Yahweh created the world in order to engage humans in a relationship of blessing with himself, and if the entire human race has been corrupted by sin, it follows that there is only one Being who can restore humans to that original purpose: Yahweh. Thus, not only is he Israel's only Savior, he is the world's only Savior. In other words, God's purposes are not for Israel alone; they are for the whole world, and Israel has been chosen to be the means whereby those purposes are realized.

The new thought that Christianity introduced was that it was no longer necessary to be incorporated into the ethnic community in order to have a relationship with God. Rather, it is possible to meet him directly in Jesus Christ. While the principles taught in the Torah remain in force for the believer in Christ, its specific practices have been shown to be external forms not essential to the truth being taught. But at its heart, the motivation that impels Christians to go to the ends of the earth is an Old Testament one: There is only one God, and that means there is only one Savior. It is for him that all the ends of the earth wait. In these last days the Savior has been manifested as the Son of God; in him we see the image of the invisible God.

Contemporary Significance

THE BURDEN OF THE GODS. Few in the Western world have idols that they carry with them from place to place (although one wonders what Isaiah's response might be to processions of saints and icons). If we may regret the artistic loss when Protestant Reformers smashed statues and stained glass, we may still recognize a similar impulse in the Old Testament prophets. But does this passage speak to us at all? It certainly does, because many contemporary persons are carrying a whole host of gods, and the burden is killing them.

I am referring to all the things that have come to replace God in our lives—perhaps a job, a house, a car, a love relationship, or even one's self-image. The pagans personalized all these, but they were seeking in the gods what we seek in these. These are the things that give us our sense of identity and meaning in life. Yet many of us are suffering from burnout or breakdown because we have all these things to carry and they have become too much for us. We need them for what they do for us, but the burdens they impose are devastatingly heavy. Instead of our using them, they use us, and the results are all around us. To escape them, we must have increasingly stimulating and exciting diversions, but then the diversions themselves become a burden.

Isaiah's answer to such contemporary problems is the same as it was 2,700 years ago. We must stop carrying those things and let the One who is in fact carrying us anyway do it for us. The issue is whether we are willing to entrust all those aspects of our lives that we feel are so necessary to us into God's hands. If we are not willing, we effectively make them idols and try to use them to provide things they cannot.

Meaning, purpose, identity, and fulfillment are ultimately only things God can provide. We truly begin to experience God's carrying of us when we take our hands off these things and relinquish them into God's hands. And why should we not? The reason is that we are afraid—afraid that God will do a worse job of directing our lives than we are able to do. On the surface of it, that is a ridiculous thought, but it is the fact. Until we are willing to do what the remnant did during the Exile and release our survival into God's hands, we are allowing our fears to keep us from knowing God's care and deliverance.

The righteousness of faith. The word "righteousness" is prominent in this section, occurring twice in Isa. 45:24–25 and twice in 46:12–13. In each case the Lord's righteousness and human righteousness are paralleled. In the first passage, we are told that righteousness is in the Lord and that in the Lord the descendants of Israel will be found righteous. In the second passage, God says his people are far from righteousness, but his righteousness is about to be revealed.

What is at stake here? First of all, it must be said that it is not incorrect to equate deliverance here with God's righteousness.⁵ He is "right" to deliver his people even though they have sinned, because such an act is an

expression of his gracious nature. But to say that the righteousness of the people is their deliverance seems more questionable. Rather, Isaiah is saying that just as God can act righteously in delivering his people, we can also act righteously. But what is that act in this context and in ours? I believe it is analogous to what Abraham did in Canaan when he believed the incredible promises of God and was accounted as righteous (Gen. 15:6). That is, Abraham did the one right thing a human can do: He believed God. That is what the exiles will be called upon to do—to believe God's promises and thus not cast away their faith. According to Isa. 46:12 they are in danger of doing that very thing. They "are far from righteousness." But in God they can "be found righteous" if they will believe what he says (45:25).

The application for us today is first of all in relationship to Christ. Paul tells us that we too can be accounted "right" if we believe God's promise that eternal life is to be found in Christ. If we seek to be right with God by doing right things, we only condemn ourselves to separation from him, because we are then saying that he is wrong in calling us hopelessly sinful in everything we do. We are not believing in his promises, we are believing in ourselves, and that is not "right." But when we agree with God when he says we are hopelessly lost, and when we believe his statement that in Christ all our sins have been forgiven, then we are "right" with God.

But this "righteousness" is also an ongoing life of faith. When we are faced with an impossible obstacle and we turn to God, believing that he will carry us through it or around it or over it, we are doing the "right" thing. To try to surmount it in our own strength or to allow it to defeat us is definitely not "right," because God's intention is that we should be "more than conquerors." So the life of faith is the life of righteousness. And as we live in constant surrender to God and trust in his promises, we will discover his plan of transformation for us, so that our behavior is more and more like his —righteous.

Isaiah 47:1–15

1"Go Down, SIT in the dust,
Virgin Daughter of Babylon;
sit on the ground without a throne,
Daughter of the Babylonians.
No more will you be called
tender or delicate.
2Take millstones and grind flour;
take off your veil.
Lift up your skirts, bare your legs,
and wade through the streams.
3Your nakedness will be exposed
and your shame uncovered.
I will take vengeance;
I will spare no one."

⁴Our Redeemer—the LORD Almighty is his name— is the Holy One of Israel.

5"Sit in silence, go into darkness,
Daughter of the Babylonians;
no more will you be called
queen of kingdoms.

6I was angry with my people
and desecrated my inheritance;
I gave them into your hand,
and you showed them no mercy.

Even on the aged
you laid a very heavy yoke.

7You said, 'I will continue forever—
the eternal queen!'

But you did not consider these things
or reflect on what might happen.

8"Now then, listen, you wanton creature, lounging in your security and saying to yourself,

'I am, and there is none besides me.

I will never be a widow or suffer the loss of children.'

⁹Both of these will overtake you in a moment, on a single day: loss of children and widowhood.

They will come upon you in full measure, in spite of your many sorceries and all your potent spells.

¹⁰You have trusted in your wickedness and have said, 'No one sees me.'

Your wisdom and knowledge mislead you when you say to yourself,

'I am, and there is none besides me.'

¹¹Disaster will come upon you, and you will not know how to conjure it away.

A calamity will fall upon you that you cannot ward off with a ransom;

a catastrophe you cannot foresee will suddenly come upon you.

12"Keep on, then, with your magic spells and with your many sorceries, which you have labored at since childhood.

Perhaps you will succeed, perhaps you will cause terror.

13All the counsel you have received has only worn you out!

Let your astrologers come forward, those stargazers who make predictions month by month, let them save you from what is coming upon you.

14Surely they are like stubble; the fire will burn them up.
They cannot even save themselves from the power of the flame.
Here are no coals to warm anyone; here is no fire to sit by.
15That is all they can do for you—these you have labored with and trafficked with since childhood.
Each of them goes on in his error; there is not one that can save you.

Original Meaning

ISAIAH 47–48 SHOULD be considered together as two sides of the final conclusion of chapters 40–48. If God is to keep his promises, two things must happen: Babylon must fall (ch. 47), and the exiled people must listen to God and believe him so that when Babylon does fall and they have the opportunity to return home, they will dare to act on the opportunity (ch. 48).

Most commentators consider chapter 47 to be a self-contained poem constructed on the model of the oracles against the nations.² With relentless vigor it declares the fall of proud Babylon. It makes its point in three stanzas: Babylon's humiliation (vv. 1–4), Babylon's false pride (vv. 5–11), and Babylon's helplessness (vv. 12–15).³ The central issue in the poem is the humiliation of Babylon and her inability to do anything about it. Ultimately, then, the issue is pride, the same issue dealt with in regard to the nations in the earlier part of the book.⁴ Can any of the nations of earth compare to Israel's Holy One? Once again, the answer is a resounding no.

Babylon's Humiliation (47:1–4)

BABYLON WAS THE queen of the world, the mightiest of the mighty, but she will soon meet one mightier than she, who says that she must leave her "throne" and "sit on the ground" (47:1). Although she is beautiful and "delicate," like a "virgin daughter" of kings, she will be forced to do menial

labor (47:2). More than that, she will be sexually humiliated. This language is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to describe being taken into exile (cf. 20:4) and to refer to nations who have allied themselves with other nations being failed or mistreated by those allies.⁵

Babylon had been on the mistreating end of that relationship for a long time, but the time is coming when she will experience what she has meted out to others. This introductory stanza is brought to a conclusion with an ejaculation of praise to the One who is bringing all this to pass, "the Holy One of Israel." He may not have seemed much to great Babylon, but he is "Yahweh of Heaven's Armies" (NIV "LORD Almighty"), and in any contest for greatness with him, Babylon does not have a chance.

Babylon's False Pride (47:5–11)

THE BABYLONIANS THOUGHT that they could do whatever they wanted to captive nations (47:6), because there was no one greater than they. They made the fatal error of thinking that they were self-existent and self-perpetuating: "I am, and there is none besides me" (47:8, 10). It never occurred to them that they might be the agents of One infinitely greater than they who will hold them to account for their actions (47:7). But there is such a Person (cf. 43:10; 44:6; 45:5, 21; 46:8), and for Babylon to have tried to usurp his prerogatives was a deadly mistake.

Part of the deadliness of that mistake is complacency. Queen Babylon is so convinced of her ascendancy that she cannot imagine herself as a widow bereft of children (47:8–9). Her complacency robs her of that beneficial self-criticism that asks whether what we are doing may reap bad consequences. Babylon has none of that, so that "wickedness" runs rampant (47:10). Part of that wickedness is the attempt to control the spirit world through magic "spells" and "sorceries" (47:9–11). The Babylonians were intelligent and devoted that intelligence to mastering magical arts, so they are sure that they can ward off any "calamity" that threatens them. They do not reckon with a God who is beyond all magical manipulation, who is complete in himself, and who knows nothing of fate or destiny (cf. 65:11).

Babylon's Helplessness (47:12–15)

THIS FINAL STANZA expands on the last thought of the previous one. On a sarcastic note, the prophet tells Babylon to go ahead with her magic. Maybe

it will work out after all (47:12)! But of course, it is futile. All the energy expended to divine the future and control its events has been wasted (47:13). What the sorcerers have set in motion is like a fire that does no one any good; it will only burn up those who started it (47:14). Babylon has done business with these sorcerers and magicians for years. But in the final crisis, they will abandon the city to go their own way.

Bridging Contexts

THE BUSINESS OF MAGIC and divination was big business in Babylon. There were classes of priests whose business was to read the significance for the future of the shape of a sacrificial animal's entrails. These omens were carefully cataloged and recorded; their official listing ran to more than seventy tablets. When we think of the tremendous effort that went into compiling and categorizing these, we get some idea of what Isaiah is talking about. But along with that work we can only imagine what effort was required to get proficient in the interpretation of the omens and in remembering where in the tablets a given phenomenon was discussed. By comparison, it makes the acquisition of a Ph.D. degree today look a little less daunting. At the same time, one would have to gain great skill in obfuscation and nuancing in order to cover the 51 percent of the time when one's prognostications would be wrong.

The same kind of incredible effort went into the study of the horoscope. How much time must have been spent staring into the night sky in order to find some coordination between the placement of the stars and current events. Along with that went the effort of cataloging and categorizing all those observations so that they would have some utility for those who would try to make use of them to tell the kings and rulers whether to undertake certain activities. In some ways, they would have been better off if they had not had so much intelligence. They would not have been able to find all the spurious connections that gave them the illusion of being able to control the fates that ruled their lives.

The amazing fact is that the horoscope still is functional today. People who deny that Jesus ever did a miracle will open the newspaper to the horoscope every day. This is nothing other than a continuation of that failed Babylonian wisdom. The organization of the sky is according to the

Babylonian system, and the names of the signs of the zodiac are Greek versions of the Babylonian names. How much effort goes into saying something each day that gives the illusion of meaning while being so vague and general that it can cover anything that happens!

What is its attraction? The same attraction that it has had for five thousand years. I can get control of my life by getting a glimpse of what is fated to occur today. God asks me to surrender my life and my future into his hands for his direction, multiplication, and blessing, but we humans would rather not surrender. We would rather apply our formidable intelligence to getting control of the world for ourselves.

Contemporary Significance

THE STATEMENT THAT Babylon's wisdom and knowledge misled them has haunting applications to the present. We can think of Germany and Japan, two of the most brilliant and energetic peoples on the earth. Where had their wisdom and knowledge led them in 1945? Into ruin. Think of how much of the world's resources were consumed in destruction between 1914 and 1945. Think of how many brilliant minds were consumed in finding more efficient ways to kill people. And think of how many brilliant and creative minds were destroyed by the engines of war.

But even in peace, intelligence not surrendered to God can be a terrible curse for the human race. Harry Emerson Fosdick's maxim "rich in things and poor in soul" continues to define us all too well. Our tremendous intelligence is, as it was for the Babylonians, aimed at making ourselves self-existent and self-perpetuating. What will cloning mean in a world where researchers have long ago denied any overarching ethical accountability that is incumbent on all people?

In an interview on National Public Radio persons advocating fetal-tissue research admitted that there are ethical issues but focused completely on the political tactics that would be necessary to get federal funding for the research. Not once did they discuss the ethics of killing the weak in order to indefinitely preserve the life of the strong. Their argument was simply that since we now have the technology do this sort of thing, we must. Our wisdom and knowledge have misled us. How long will it be before the

Redeemer, whose name is Yahweh of Heaven's Armies, the Holy One of Israel, tells us to get off our throne and to take our place in the dust?

Isaiah 48:1–22

¹"LISTEN TO THIS, O house of Jacob, you who are called by the name of Israel and come from the line of Judah, vou who take oaths in the name of the LORD and invoke the God of Israel but not in truth or righteousness— ²vou who call yourselves citizens of the holy city and rely on the God of Israel the LORD Almighty is his name: ³I foretold the former things long ago, my mouth announced them and I made them known: then suddenly I acted, and they came to pass. ⁴For I knew how stubborn you were; the sinews of your neck were iron, your forehead was bronze. ⁵Therefore I told you these things long ago; before they happened I announced them to you so that you could not say, 'My idols did them; my wooden image and metal god ordained them.' ⁶You have heard these things; look at them all. Will you not admit them? "From now on I will tell you of new things, of hidden things unknown to you.

⁷They are created now, and not long ago;

you have not heard of them before today.

So you cannot say,

'Yes, I knew of them.'

⁸You have neither heard nor understood; from of old your ear has not been open.

Well do I know how treacherous you are; you were called a rebel from birth.

⁹For my own name's sake I delay my wrath;

for the sake of my praise I hold it back from you,

so as not to cut you off.

¹⁰See, I have refined you, though not as silver;

I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.

¹¹For my own sake, for my own sake, I do this.

How can I let myself be defamed? I will not yield my glory to another.

12"Listen to me, O Jacob, Israel, whom I have called:

I am he;

I am the first and I am the last.

¹³My own hand laid the foundations of the earth,

and my right hand spread out the heavens;

when I summon them, they all stand up together.

14"Come together, all of you, and listen: Which of the idols has foretold these things?

The LORD's chosen ally
will carry out his purpose against
Babylon;
his arm will be against the
Babylonians.

15I, even I, have spoken;
yes, I have called him.
I will bring him,
and he will succeed in his mission.

¹⁶"Come near me and listen to this:

"From the first announcement I have not spoken in secret; at the time it happens, I am there."

And now the Sovereign LORD has sent me, with his Spirit.

¹⁷This is what the LORD says your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:

"I am the LORD your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go.

18If only you had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river, your righteousness like the waves of the sea.

19 Your descendants would have been like the sand, your children like its numberless grains;

their name would never be cut off

nor destroyed from before me."

20 Leave Babylon, flee from the Babylonians!
Announce this with shouts of joy and proclaim it.
Send it out to the ends of the earth; say, "The LORD has redeemed his servant Jacob."
21 They did not thirst when he led them through the deserts; he made water flow for them from the rock; he split the rock and water gushed out.

²²"There is no peace," says the LORD, "for the wicked."

Original Meaning

As WE HAVE noted earlier, chapters 40–55 deal primarily with two questions that the exiles would be asking, which were two phases of a single larger question: Does not the fact of the Exile prove that God has been defeated? Either he has been defeated by the Babylonian gods, or he has been defeated by our sin. While both issues are addressed in chapters 41–47, the primary focus is on demonstrating that the gods have not defeated God in the slightest degree. With the announcement of judgment on Babylon, that argument has come to its climax. But will the exiles believe the promises that have been given to them, or will they give up their faith along the way so that when the prophecies of deliverance are fulfilled, there will be none left to act on them?

Clearly, Isaiah, looking at his own experience (cf. 48:8), sees that as a real possibility. So this chapter is a stirring call to faith. Words for hearing occur ten times in this chapter as the prophet reminds the people that it is because they have not listened in the past that they are in their present

condition; he then admonishes them to listen to the promises now that they are in exile.

Opening Words (48:1–2)

THESE TWO VERSES are strongly negative. The people identify themselves as the descendants of "Jacob" and as being "from the line of Judah." They consider themselves to be God's people. But Isaiah says that is not so. While he does not explain why he says this here, 48:4 and 8 do. They have not been obedient people; rather, they have been stubborn and rebellious. They have a name, but their behavior has shown that they do not have a relationship.

The Nature of Israel's God (48:3–11)

AFTER THE ATTENTION-GRABBING opening words, God sums up his claim to be an entirely different order of being than the gods. He begins by referring to the past. The people have heard all the predictions God has made, and they know all his predictions have come true (48:3). He made the predictions precisely so that when the events occurred, it would be impossible to say that some idol god performed the actions (48:4–5). In 48:6a, Isaiah calls the people to "admit" the truth of their experience and to draw the appropriate conclusions from that experience.

Then in 48:6b, the prophet turns to the future. He will predict new things that have not been heard before. What these things are, are not specified, and indeed that is not the point of the statement.² The point is that God can do new things, something the idols cannot do. He is the Creator and can therefore say and do things that have never happened before. He is doing this precisely so that no one can "defame" him by comparing him to an idol and so that no idol may share his "glory" (48:11).³

God's Appeal to His People (48:12–22)

THESE VERSES SHARPEN God's appeal to his people. Three times they are commanded to listen (48:12, 14, 16). As with a number of Hebrew words, the word *šama* ("listen") does not permit a separation between perception and action. Thus, if you truly "hear" an admonition, you will obey it. If you do not obey it, then you evidently did not "hear" it. Here, then, if God's people "listen" to what God says, they will believe his words and act

accordingly. They will retain their faith in him in spite of adverse circumstances, will be ready to leave the known in Babylon, and will take the risk of the unknown in returning to Judah when the time comes.

Verses 12–16 recap the reasons why the people should listen to (and put their faith in) God. He is the sole Creator (vv. 12–13), before everything and after everything. He is the Lord of history (vv. 14–15). Just as he summons the stars of the heavens and they obey (v. 13), so he can also summon a Persian emperor, who will do what God has purposed all along (v. 14). No idol can predict such a thing in advance as God has because they are captive to the cycles of time and fate. They can only do what they have always done. Neither do they have any overarching purpose for human experience. So they cannot possibly do what God has done in foretelling a hitherto unheard of thing and in bringing it to pass.

The challenge to hear is summed up in 48:16 with a reiteration of the claim that God is the speaking God. From the beginning of time God has spoken in terms that are intelligible to humans. He has not hidden himself in the babble of diviners and mediums (8:19–20; 29:4) but has used ordinary, straightforward language (45:19). He has done this by inspiring persons with his "Spirit" so that their own words became the very words of God.⁴ If God has spoken, surely humans should listen.

Verses 17–22 sum up everything that has been said in the chapter and, in some ways, in the entire subdivision (chs. 40–48). In keeping with this idea of summation, verse 17 identifies God by a group of his names and titles: "the LORD your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel," and "your God." The last three of these denote the special relationship of God to Israel. Not only is he the speaking God, but he is also the God of grace and love. He cares deeply about the choices we make and the directions our lives take. So he has made his will known to Israel and called them to follow it. If they had "paid attention" (cf. 28:23; 32:3) in the past, none of the tragedies that are to befall them in the Exile would have occurred. Instead, all the promises that God had made to them would have been fulfilled (48:18–19).

But even though they did not listen in the past, that does not mean God has been defeated by their sin and has given up on them. If they will believe God now, they can be delivered from Babylon, into which their deaf ears and hardened hearts have delivered them. For the One who created the earth is capable of redeeming those whom he has created. In the world of the

gods, the world of continuity, where all things are as they have always been, ruled by inexorable fate, there is no possibility of redemption. The gods cannot change anything. But God's creation is not a world of continuity. Just because no one had ever gone home from exile before does not mean it cannot happen. The Creator can break in and make "water flow" from rocks if he chooses.

The allusion to the Exodus is clear here. What he has done in the past shows that he can be equally creative to redeem his people again. "Announce this with shouts of joy!" But joy is not the final note here. As always in this book (cf. ch. 5; 25:10–12; etc.), the prophet is careful not to let the wonderful promises of the future delude his hearers into believing that they can leave their present condition unaddressed (48:22). If they persist in wickedness, none of these promises are for them. They must change their way of responding if they are to have a part in the coming joy.

Bridging Contexts

THE NATURE OF REBELLION. From beginning (1:2) to end (66:24) the book of Isaiah is addressing rebellion. That is entirely appropriate, for the Bible as a whole does the same thing. Rebellion is the refusal to "stay within the lines," which is just what Adam and Eve did in Eden (Gen. 2–3). That kind of behavior is what is being talked about in Revelation 21:8 and 22:18–19. God has created us to live in certain ways, and refusal to do so results in disaster.

The word "refusal" is important in all this. Rebellion is not an ignorant missing of God's ways. It is an intentional and deliberate refusal to do what we know we should, and beneath that is the rejection of a relationship of dependence that acknowledges God has the right to declare what is right and wrong for us. This is a part of the significance of the Sinai covenant. As humans we are in a de facto relation of dependence on our Creator (cf. Rom. 1:18–23). But God clearly desires our relationship with him to be personal and not merely de facto. The theme of "dwelling in your midst" (cf. Num. 5:3) that ultimately issues in "remain in me" (John 15:7) shows this. In other words, the covenant puts the whole element of obedience and dependence squarely in the relational arena.

Thus, what the Hebrews did when they rebelled against God was not just disobedience, but, as it is defined here (Isa. 48:8), "treachery," a breaking of faith. God never intends for our lives to be shaped by conformity to a list of abstract rules. Rather, he intends for them to be shaped by a joyous pursuit of greater and greater likeness to the character of our covenant Lord, our Father.

So in the end "rebellion," "stubbornness," and "treachery" are what sin is all about. It is entirely appropriate that Christ should have been betrayed by one of his own disciples, because that is what God's family have been doing to him since the dawn of time. We have not just accidentally fallen into a ditch. Instead, like the two-year-old who has been told not to go down a steep stairway alone and who looks to make sure that he is being watched and then starts down the stairs, we have consciously and willfully chosen to walk in the ditch.

The importance of revelation. Central to this chapter is the idea that God has revealed himself, the nature of reality, and his will for human behavior. He has spoken. If this premise is wrong, then it is not merely this chapter that must be discarded; the Bible and the whole structure of Christian faith will go with it. After all, the idea of revelation, namely, that God has spoken to us, is at the center of the biblical claims.

This is as it should be, given the doctrine of transcendence. If God is truly other than creation, then it is impossible for us who are a part of creation to know him in any ultimate way through creation. Certainly, as Psalm 19 tells us, creation can tell us some things about the Creator (Ps. 19:1–6). But if we are to know his true character, nature, and will, he will have to communicate those things to us in ways that are intelligible to us, and that means language (19:7–14). Thus, if the Bible is not an inspired record of the speech of God and the implications of that speech but only one more attempt to express human groping for the ultimate, it is both deceptive and wrong.

One evidence that the Bible does indeed stem ultimately from God is the worldview of transcendence and the concepts that flow from it. If the transcendent God did not himself explain reality in this way, it would be impossible to explain where these ideas, such as monotheism and the prohibition of idolatry, have come from. In recent years the Bible's uniqueness and the uniqueness of its view of God have come under

concerted attack. In part this attack was deserved, since advocates for uniqueness have sometimes made claims that were excessive. However, the attackers have gone too far in the opposite direction.

One example is the work of Mark Smith, who argues that the religion of Yahweh is an evolutionary development from Canaanite theology. He bases his conclusions on certain similarities, both in language and practice, between Yahwism and the Canaanite theology. But he does not pay adequate attention to the radical differences between the end results of the two faiths. This is a bit like showing that dogs and humans share many features and then asserting that there is no essential difference between humans and dogs.

This claim to revelation means that in the end the Christian faith cannot coexist with other religions as one more way of thinking about God. If God is the only Creator, who has revealed himself uniquely to Israel and whose revelation culminated in Jesus Christ, then Jesus is the only means of access to God. This is, of course, what the Bible claims. If those claims are not correct, then Christian faith is simply wrong from top to bottom.

C. S. Lewis made the point in a well-known statement: "A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things that Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with a man who says he is poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell." We cannot have his teachings without his deity. Either he is who he is claimed to be by the Scripture, speaking to us as the Creator of the world, first and last, covenant Lord and Holy One, the only Redeemer, or we are living a delusion. There is no middle ground. If the Bible is not finally the speech of God, then the faith it proclaims must be discarded, for it will not live alongside the other view. Either the world is an effusion of the divine, or the Holy One of Israel is the world's Creator. Both ideas cannot be so, and if the former is so, then deity only "speaks" from within us. There is no god to speak to us from beyond ourselves because in the end there is nothing beyond ourselves.

The exercise of faith. Paul says that faith comes by the hearing of the Word (Rom. 10:17). In a real sense that is what Isaiah is saying as well. Faith is an obedient response to revelation. It is to "hear" God's Word in the active sense described above. It is not merely to hear and do nothing. In the end, that is rebellion. Rather, it is to hear and to take action on what is said.

Thus, it is wrong to describe faith as merely a set of beliefs. That is not one's faith. The devils, we are told, "believe" in God (James 2:19). They know intellectually that God exists. They even know what is said in his Word, because the demons recognized that Jesus was the promised Messiah (Luke 4:34). They have an orthodox set of beliefs, but they have no faith.

On the other hand, faith is not what is today referred to as "spirituality," that is, a loosely defined set of mystical emotions and experiences. To disconnect one's intellect and will from one's perceptions in an attempt to participate in the divine is not faith. In fact, it may be the furthest thing from faith, for it involves no obedience to an imperative Word from beyond ourselves. Rather, it seeks to avoid the reality of the distinction between creature and Creator and to find a way into the divine that demands no obedience at all. That way lies disaster, for what we will be absorbed into is not God, but that whole set of his creatures who have also tried to find an access to his power and being without obedience.

No, to have faith is to truly hear a word of invitation, of hope, and of command from the One who is unutterably far beyond ourselves. But it is also to hear a word of condemnation and destruction from One who is light to our darkness, purity to our filth, strength to our weakness. These words leave us no option but to move. Bartimaeus, imprisoned in his blindness, heard the words, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you!" and he threw off his cloak and came to Jesus (Mark 10:46–52). To do otherwise would be to condemn himself to darkness for the rest of his days. That is faith. It is to construct your life in active response to the revelation of God. It is to live in accordance with what he has said and is saying in his Word.

Contemporary Significance

THE BIBLE AND WORLDVIEWS. There can be little doubt that the Western world is steadily losing its hold on the Bible. One indication of this is found in a children's book titled *The Green Book*. This book is about a group of people who are forced to leave a dying earth to colonize a distant planet. Because of weight limitations, each person can take only one book. The plot then revolves around what books are brought and the incredibly important place these books come to have in the life of the community. The

author's premise is that "story" is profoundly important in shaping one's perception of oneself and the world.

This is certainly a correct insight. But the interesting thing is that in the context of such works as *The Odyssey* and *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, the author neglects to have anyone bring a Bible. The enormity of this omission is incredible. It says a good deal about the author, but it also says a good deal about our society. There is no doubt that the single story that has shaped the West is the Bible. It is the best-selling book of all time. Yet at the end of the twentieth century a book can be written about the perpetuation of human civilization that ignores the Bible.

Another evidence of this phenomenon is the mounting influence of a nonbiblical worldview on us. The worldview of continuity, which knows nothing of transcendence, sees no real possibility of change. Human beings are caught in the continuous cycles of time, where everything is changing but nothing is really different. As the aphorism has it, the more we change, the more we are the same. Deterministic naturalism is only an abstract and scholarly way of saying what the ancient myths said: Choice is an illusion. We each do what we must do as a result of all the conditioning that has occurred in our lives.

In the ancient world this was known as fate. You could not change your fate; you could only react to it. This is the central idea in Greek tragic dramas. The hero is caught in a web of fate, and the plot revolves around how he meets that fate in a noble way. So Oedipus is fated to have sexual relations with his mother. He leaves his country and changes his identity in order to avoid this terrible thing. But years later and in another place, he falls in love with a beautiful older woman. When their love is culminated, it is revealed to them that they are mother and son.

This idea is a contemporary one. Displayed in a jet airliner in 2001 are the words, "If you can't change your fate, change your attitude." In other words, there is really no hope of transcending your past. You cannot change the ways you react and behave. You cannot conquer ingrained habits and tendencies. All you can do is accept them without whining and complaining and go to your doom with your head held high. If you deny the biblical worldview, there is only one other option, the same one held by the ancient Babylonians and Greeks, by Hindus and Buddhists—and it is no different in

the supposedly irreligious West today. If we will not listen to the biblical story, then we *will* listen to the other one. It is the only other option.

But if the biblical understanding of reality is no longer a part of the furniture of many of our minds, it continues to be a wonderful option for us. The cycles of time and existence are not all there is, nor is psychological conditioning. There is One who "sits above the circle of the earth" (Isa. 40:22), who is not a prisoner of its cycles or its conditioning. He is able to break into it and do something never done before. Just because Israel has had a long history of rebellion and treachery does not mean it is doomed to continue in that way or that every single Israelite is doomed to continue in that way. By the power of the transcendent Redeemer, they can change. They can be responsive and obedient, walking in his ways and following his instruction, his Torah. He has done everything necessary for that change if they will just listen.

The same is true for us today. We can leave the "Babylons" that have enslaved us. We can be delivered from the guilt and shame of all our past sins. In Jesus Christ, God has made a way for us. If ever there was a new thing, the coming of Christ was it. Can the immortal God become mortal? Can the eternal Spirit take up a body of flesh? Can the One who is everywhere present be localized and contained in a womb? If we do not believe in transcendence, the answer is no. These things have never happened before, and they are not a part of the recurring story of life as we know it.

But if we believe that the Creator of the universe is not limited by his creation, the answer is yes. God can do the impossible and bring about genuine change. He can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. So he has reconciled us to himself (2 Cor. 5:19), nailing our death certificate to Christ's cross (Col. 2:14). This means that "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Phil. 4:13). And if God can do what he has done in Christ, he can do anything, including delivering us from all that has "fated" us. We are not doomed to simply trying to accept our fate with some sort of heroic, noble demeanor. Our fate can be changed. God can make new creatures.

But the issue is the same for us as it was for the ancient Israelites: Will we believe it? Will we "listen" to what God says in his revealed Word? Unless we do so, all his revelation is in vain. This is a startling thought. The

power of the transcendent Creator/Redeemer is limited by our response to it, just as was undoubtedly the case when many of the exiled Judeans did not believe the words of the prophet and thus were unprepared to go home when the opportunity came. We must "hear" God's revelation in the active sense of responding to it and obeying it. Christian salvation offers the possibility of real change in our lives as God does new things for us. But that change is only available to those who "listen."

Isaiah 49:1–13

¹LISTEN TO ME, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the LORD called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name.

²He made my mouth like a sharpened sword,

in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver.

³He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor."

⁴But I said, "I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing.

Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand, and my reward is with my God."

he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength—

⁶he says:

"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept.

I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

⁷This is what the LORD says the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel

to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, to the servant of rulers:

"Kings will see you and rise up, princes will see and bow down, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

⁸This is what the LORD says:

"In the time of my favor I will answer you, and in the day of salvation I will help you;
I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people,

to restore the land and to reassign its desolate inheritances,

9to say to the captives, 'Come out,' and to those in darkness, 'Be free!'

"They will feed beside the roads and find pasture on every barren hill.

¹⁰They will neither hunger nor thirst, nor will the desert heat or the sun beat upon them.

He who has compassion on them will guide them

and lead them beside springs of water.

11 Will turn all my mountains into roads, and my highways will be raised up.

12 See, they will come from afar—some from the north, some from the west, some from the region of Aswan."

13Shout for joy, O heavens;
 rejoice, O earth;
 burst into song, O mountains!
 For the LORD comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.

Original Meaning

CHAPTERS 49–55 ADDRESS the second problem that will confront the exiled people. The first is their captivity in Babylon. If they are to be the redeemed servants of the Lord, they need to be set free and to live and minister in the land of God's promises. That issue was dealt with in chapters 41–48: God has a plan of deliverance for his people, even before the tragedy has occurred, and there is nothing the Babylonian gods or the Babylonian power can do to stop that plan from being accomplished.

But there is a second problem confronting both God and his people. What is to be done about the sin that got the people into this dilemma in the first place? God has declared repeatedly that they are his chosen servants. But how can this be? How can these sinful people ever serve a just and holy God? He cannot simply ignore their sin, so what is to be done? In its own way, this alienation from God is a much more serious problem than their captivity in Babylon. So what can God's grace do to address this problem?

The answer to that question is given in chapters 49–55. Although the language and imagery of captivity continues, specific reference to Babylon and its idols is conspicuously absent, as is any further reference to Cyrus. In other words, a different kind of captivity is being addressed here, and the deliverer from this captivity is the Servant of the Lord, who was first

introduced in 42:1–9. He will be for Israel what Israel could not be in itself. His servanthood will make possible theirs—and ours. As he becomes the means of Israel's restoration to God, he makes them the prototype for the restoration of all the world.

This subdivision has three sections. In 49:1–52:12 God repeatedly insists that he has not cast his people off. In other words, the hope of the world begins in the heart of the Creator, who is unwilling to let his people go. But the section is also marked by an increasing intensity of anticipation. Somehow God is going to deliver his people from their captivity to sin. This intensity reaches its climax in chapter 52, with its ringing call to leave the captivity that has held them. The third section (54:1–55:13) is marked by an invitation to participate in a deliverance that is seen as accomplished.

What accounts for the change from anticipation to participation? It is the second section (52:13–53:12), the fourth and last of the so-called "Suffering Servant" passages, which provides the answer to our question, as the preceding "Servant Songs" (49:1–13; 50:4–9) have led us to expect. The Servant of the Lord will give his life so that God's people may be restored from their alienation into his fellowship and his service.

The Salvation Task of the Servant (49:1–6)

IN CHAPTERS 41–48, with only one exception, the emphasis was on the servanthood of the nation of Israel. For the most part, all of those references were encouraging a blind and rebellious Israel to believe that God had not cast them off and that God would use them as evidence in his case against the idols. The one exception was the second reference to "servant" (42:1–9). Here the Servant was announced as the obedient One who would bring God's justice to the nations and who would be a covenant to "the people." I argued there that this Servant was not the nation of Israel but Israel's ultimate Deliverer, introduced there before focusing again on the more immediate problem of the captivity in Babylon.

Now with that problem of the Exile having been thoroughly dealt with, however, we can return to address the second problem, the one that the Servant will solve. We can imagine Isaiah's readers saying, as they come to the end of what is now chapter 48, "Alright, we're listening and we can believe that God can and will restore us from Babylon by means of Cyrus. But who can restore us to God? That's the real problem." Isaiah's answer is

given in these verses. It begins with a continuation of the call to "listen." The prophet is continuing to unfold God's plan, which calls for yet a further obedient, believing response. But now it is the Servant himself who calls for the entire world to listen to what he is going to reveal.

The first revelation is one of call and confidence. The Servant has no doubt of his call (49:1), his divine enablement (49:2–3), or his ultimate vindication (49:4). He has been called from the womb, so his vocation is no secondary thing. Furthermore, he is perfectly suited for whatever task God may have for him. Like a "sharpened sword" or a "polished arrow" he will accomplish exactly what God wants at the appointed time. There is no hint of blindness or rebellion in this Servant. Even though his servanthood seems futile (the first emergence of a theme that will grow in 50:4–9 and 52:13–53:12), he knows that God will not fail him.

The contrast with the nation is obvious here. But if that is so, why is the Servant specifically named "Israel" in 49:3? This question has raised a great deal of controversy, which I cannot discuss in detail here. In general, there are three options: The passage is referring to the nation, to the prophet, or to some ideal Israel. As I have said, the descriptions here do not match what is said of Israel, and if there is any further question, 49:5–6 seals the issue: Israel cannot be the agent to restore Israel to God. As far as this person being the prophet himself, the language is far too sweeping to be applied to any ordinary human. This leaves only the third option, which I have already advocated above. The Messiah will be "Israel" as Israel was meant to be. He will display the Lord's "splendor" (49:3) as an obedient Israel might have done, and in so doing, he will be the One "who restores the tribes of Jacob" to the Lord.

How that will be done is left unanswered here, but it will be answered a few chapters later. Whatever it is will be so far-reaching that it will reach to the ends of the earth, including even "Gentiles" in its scope (49:6).³ "Salvation" here corresponds to "justice" in 42:1 and helps to amplify the meaning of "justice" to divine order, as discussed there. For God to "save" the world means to bring it into the order he intended, and for God to bring about that order it is necessary for him to save it from the bondage sin holds over it.

The Servant's Task As Representative of God's Covenant (49:7–12)

In these verses God addresses the Servant in ways that are reminiscent of the dialogue in Psalm 2. God declares that although the Servant is "despised" and reduced to the level of a slave, a day will come when kings and princes will honor him because of God's faithfulness in his life (49:7; cf. Phil. 2:5–11). In particular, the Servant's task is to be a representative of God's "covenant" to his people. Like a new Joshua he will settle the people in a land of freedom and abundance, where the God of "compassion" will tend them as a shepherd tends his flock (Isa. 49:8–11). While 49:12 may be intended to speak of the remnant returning from all directions, it may also be another indication of the worldwide scope of the Servant's ministry. People of all sorts from all kinds of places will find restoration to God through him.

Outburst of Praise (49:13)

As IN 42:10–17, the announcement of the work of the Servant results in an outburst of praise. As there, nature is called on to sing the praise of its Creator and Redeemer. As nature has involuntarily experienced the effects of human sin (Gen. 3:17), so also it will experience the effects of our redemption (see also Isa. 44:23; 55:12–13; note the promise in 65:17). The terms "comfort" along with "his/my people" are reintroduced here for the first time since chapter 40; they will recur several more times in the immediately following passages. Having dealt with the questions about God that the captivity would raise, the prophet can now return to the opening themes of the division (chs. 40–55) and show how the ideal Servant will make them possible.

Bridging Contexts

THE CONCEPT OF SERVANT. "Servant" is not an easy concept for us to deal with today for several reasons. One is its unfortunate association with American slavery. As a result of that association, the term is surrounded with connotations of brutality, deprivation, and injustice. A second difficulty is the association of this term with house servants in Europe. Although coercion is not a factor there, it still involves the idea of lower-class, menial work. For these reasons it is difficult for us to envision all that is going on in the term.

Unquestionably, the word connotes taking a lower place. Also, "servant" connotes the idea of ownership. But slavery in the ancient world was not at all like the plantation slavery of the American South. For instance, in Greece and Rome, the teachers of children in noble families were often slaves. Thus, educated and even upper-class people might be in slavery for a time. In the Old Testament, a person might voluntarily enslave himself or herself for a time to someone else if the burden of debt became too great to bear (Lev. 25:39–41). Not only did this provide a way of getting on one's feet again, it also provided protection from creditors. In both America and Europe, this practice continued in the form of "indentured servitude."

But beyond these matters, the concept of "servant" is a larger one than we normally think of. It partakes of the same idea that caused people two hundred years ago to close their letters with the phrase "Your obedient servant." To be sure, that was primarily flowery, formal language. But it also expressed the idea that each of us, no matter what our position in life, may be of service to others. Thus, high officials in the government were called "servants" (a word that developed into "ministers") of the king. Thus, for God to call someone his "servant" is not to say, "You are my bootblack," or "You are the one who does the difficult, demeaning work I don't want to do." It is to say that the servant will perform an essential service for someone whom they gladly recognize not only as master but also as savior. That servant finds both protection and hope in a relationship with someone who is stronger and more resourceful than he is. That servant is the key agent for the accomplishment of the master's work in the world.

Ultimately, the task of servanthood can be a position of high honor, as when the king says to someone, "I would like you to be my Prime Minister (First Servant)." Although in the government of heaven the position of "Prime Minister" is already filled by the Son of God, what an honor it is to be invited to take any position in that government. So, yes, accepting the place of servant of the Lord involves a limitation of our autonomy, but that autonomy was a delusion anyway. In return for that voluntary limitation, we gain deliverance, protection, and a position from which we can perform valuable service for the King.

Contemporary Significance

EXPERIENCING THE MINISTRY OF JESUS. What does it mean for us to have experienced the ministry of Jesus Christ, God's Servant, in the light of this passage? It means both benefits and character, according to the New Testament. These are made available to us through a mystical union with Christ. Jesus says that we are the branches of his vine and that his life flows through us (John 15:5–8). Paul speaks of our dying with Christ to the old life of sin and being raised to a new life characterized by his "mind" or attitude toward life (Rom. 6:1–4; Gal. 2:20; Phil. 2:1–5).

In the comments on Isaiah 48 I spoke about the danger of mere "spirituality" divorced from a genuine "listening" to the revealed Word of God. I want to underline what I also said there that this does not reduce the Christian life to adherence to a set of mental constructs or of moral ideals. Rather, we have the privilege of participating in the life of God as we follow the guidance he gives in his Word. We can become the servants of God as we share the life of the Servant.

The benefits we experience in this participation include a sense of calling, enablement, and confidence. Just as Christ was called from the womb (49:1, 5), so Christian servants can know that they too have a calling that is suited particularly to them. That does not mean we will necessarily be performing the same tasks throughout our lives as may have been more common in another generation. But it does mean that God has put us together in a certain kind of way and that we can find that way of living out our lives in fulfillment of his will and calling.

It is apparently the sociologist Max Weber who coined the phrase "the Protestant work ethic" as he studied the impact of this truth of divine calling as emphasized by Martin Luther. Luther recognized the fact that God does not merely call people to religious professions, as was the implication of Roman Catholic tradition. He calls all persons, and each one of us can fulfill our daily tasks with that joyous sense of carrying out the very call of God.

Furthermore, as those who participate in the life of the Servant, we too can have that sense of enablement by God. We too can become aware of being a "sharpened sword" or a "polished arrow" in his hand (49:2). This does not mean we are necessarily doing something earth-shaking as the Servant, Jesus Christ, did. However, as we perform what may seem to be simple tasks, they may have more significance than we will ever know on

this side of the grave. But in the daily round we can have that sense of having been divinely fitted for just what it is we are doing.

This does not mean we will never feel that our lives are pointless and futile. The clear implication of 49:4 and 7 is that Christ felt that way. At the end of a long day of verbal jousting with the religious leaders who ought to have been the most responsive and were yet the most recalcitrant, he must have felt that way. Similarly, when the disciples failed to grasp a simple spiritual truth for the fourteenth time, he must have felt that way. And when the great crowds of his early ministry began to drift away, there is something almost plaintive in his question to the disciples, "You do not want to leave too, do you?" (John 6:67). In other words, do not think that to have a sense of calling and of divine enablement means you will always feel "on top of things." He did not, so why should we?

But in the midst of that frustration and sense of futility, Jesus never lost the confidence of who he was and what that meant. He knew that he was God's and God was his (cf. "my God" in Isa. 49:4). He knew that if he would only be faithful, he could trust the outcome of his service into God's hands. He might be despised and abhorred by people (49:7), or he might be honored by them, but they were not the ultimate dispensers of the rewards. He knew, as we can know, that "my reward is with my God" (49:4). In the words of Psalm 56:4:

In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?

Isaiah 49:14-50:3

- ¹⁴But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me."
- 15"Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne?

Though she may forget, I will not forget you!

- ¹⁶See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me.
- ¹⁷Your sons hasten back, and those who laid you waste depart from you.
- ¹⁸Lift up your eyes and look around; all your sons gather and come to you.
- As surely as I live," declares the LORD, "you will wear them all as ornaments; you will put them on, like a bride.
- 19"Though you were ruined and made desolate and your land laid waste, now you will be too small for your people, and those who devoured you will be far away.
- 20 The children born during your bereavement will yet say in your hearing,
 'This place is too small for us; give us more space to live in.'
- ²¹Then you will say in your heart,

'Who bore me these?
I was bereaved and barren;
I was exiled and rejected.
Who brought these up?
I was left all alone,
but these—where have they come
from?'"

²²This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

"See, I will beckon to the Gentiles,
I will lift up my banner to the peoples;
they will bring your sons in their arms
and carry your daughters on their
shoulders.

²³Kings will be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers.

They will bow down before you with their faces to the ground; they will lick the dust at your feet.

Then you will know that I am the LORD; those who hope in me will not be disappointed."

²⁴Can plunder be taken from warriors, or captives rescued from the fierce?

²⁵But this is what the LORD says:

"Yes, captives will be taken from warriors, and plunder retrieved from the fierce; I will contend with those who contend with you, and your children I will save.

26 I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh;

they will be drunk on their own blood, as with wine.

Then all mankind will know that I, the LORD, am your Savior, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob."

^{50:1}This is what the LORD says:

"Where is your mother's certificate of divorce

with which I sent her away?

Or to which of my creditors did I sell you?

Because of your sins you were sold; because of your transgressions your mother was sent away.

²When I came, why was there no one? When I called, why was there no one to answer?

Was my arm too short to ransom you?

Do I lack the strength to rescue you?

By a mere rebuke I dry up the sea,

I turn rivers into a desert;
their fish rot for lack of water
and die of thirst.

³I clothe the sky with darkness and make sackcloth its covering."

Original Meaning

THIS PASSAGE CONSISTS of the people's negative response to the proclamation of the Servant's redemptive work (49:14) and God's extended rejoinder (49:15–50:3). In words reminiscent of 40:27, the people declare that the great promises about the Servant's ministry are in vain because it is plain that "the Lord has forgotten" them. To this God replies that he can no more forget them than a nursing mother can forget her baby (49:15–16). He

goes on to declare that the proof of his love for them will be seen in the abundance of "descendants" that will be born to Zion when she thought herself forever barren (49:17–21). God will cause the nations to bring the lost children home (49:22–23).

But these promises elicit another pessimistic answer: Who can break the grip of the captors (49:24)? Again God responds that he can do that very thing (49:25–26). The third response is only implicit, but on the basis of God's response in 50:1–3, it seems to be something like: "But you are the one who (arbitrarily) sold us to those captors in the first place." To that God responds again that he has not cast them off and has the power to restore them at will.

The language of return here is clearly out of proportion to the actual returns that occurred in 538 and 445 B.C. Those were relatively small affairs. There certainly was not, as Motyer phrases it, "a population explosion" in the Exile so that more returned than those who went into exile in the first place.² So if these statements were intended to be a prediction of literal events, the prophet is sadly mistaken.³

But there is good reason to understand that these statements were never intended to be taken literally. As I said above, the focus is now on the return to God, and Isaiah is speaking figuratively about a worldwide response to God's reconciliation through the work of the Servant. God has not forgotten his ancient promises to Abraham. The patriarch will indeed have more children than the stars of the heavens or the sand of the seashore. Even if Zion's sin and exile make it appear as if Abraham's line has come to an end, that is not the case. Another evidence that the physical returns from Babylon are not in view is the appearance of these same figures of speech in chapters 56–66, which have their historical setting in the postexilic period. There the return has already occurred, yet the promises of Zion's abundant motherhood continue to be made (cf. 60:9; 66:7–11, 20).

Once again, the issue of possibility and impossibility is at the heart of what is taking place here. From this world's perspective, it is impossible for Israel to be restored into a relationship with God. She has been divorced by him (50:1), and her children are either dead or sold into captivity (49:21). A barren, bereaved woman without a man in her life cannot have children. This is a fact of nature. But God insists that not only will the exiled children return (49:17–18) but that more children will be born to the mother (49:19–

21). No wonder the incredulous remark, "Where have they come from" (49:21)?

The transcendent Creator, who could do a new thing in making Babylon give up the captives, can also do a new thing and get the very nations who threatened the life of Israel to be the ones to assist her in fulfilling her calling to be a blessing to the world. As he promised before (11:10, 12), the Servant/Messiah will be the banner God raises to call the nations to himself (49:22). They will come gladly, owning their debt to Israel as God's people (49:23). All of this will confirm two things for the Israelites: Yahweh is indeed the Lord, the one who causes all things to be, and those who "wait for" (NIV "hope in"; cf. 30:18) him "will not be disappointed" (49:23). The God who can defeat the power of all the Assyrias and the Babylons of the world can also defeat the power of sin.

But the astonishing thing is that he cannot do these things for his people if they will not give him an opportunity, by putting their trust in him. As we have said earlier, chapters 40–55 focus on the motivation to trust God. Chapters 7–39 have amply demonstrated that God can and should be trusted. But ultimately it is only the grace of God that can actually motivate persons to believe what he says and to exercise that trust (cf. 12:1–2). This passage is an expression of that grace, reaching its climax in the passionate words of 50:1–3, where God insists that he has both the will and the power to redeem his people.

To be sure, it is no accident of history that the Judeans experienced the Exile; it was because of their sin (50:1). But just as no nation on earth can stand up to God, neither can sin. Do they think he has divorced them? Where is the certificate? There is none. Do they think he was somehow forced to "sell" them against his will? Of course not. But just as he alone could deliver them from the power of the nations, he alone has the power to deliver from sin. His "arm" is not "short" and weak; rather, it is full-sized and powerful. He can "dry up the sea" and turn off the sun; what is so difficult about defeating sin?

Bridging Contexts

WAITING ON THE LORD. The recurring theme throughout this passage is God's attempt to overcome an unwillingness to believe what he says. This

is particularly evident in the contrast between 49:13 and 14. God has promised "comfort" and "compassion," but the people say that it is not true because God has forgotten them. This attitude is reminiscent of what Isaiah encountered in his own day. God had promised deliverance to the people of Judah from the Assyrian threat if they would only "wait" for him. But they had refused to do so, preferring to trust an Assyria to deliver them from the threat of Israel and Syria or an Egypt from the threat of Assyria. Evidently the same tendency was to persist into the Exile, where people gave up on God and turned to accommodating themselves to the Babylonian culture.

The book of Daniel shows that not all of the Judeans succumbed to this pressure, but the book also shows how persistent and pervasive the pressure was. Nebuchadnezzar was king of the universe, and he was not about to permit a "fifth column" close to the center of his empire to suggest that there was a king greater than he. So it was no easy thing to "wait" for the Lord to fulfill his promises.

This was especially true in regard to the promises of the Servant/Messiah, who would defeat the power of sin and bring in the kingdom of right. It only took a little less than seventy years from the time the first captives were taken in 605 B.C. until the first return in 538 B.C., but it took hundreds of years for the Servant to take his throne. Why did God make his people wait so long for the fulfillment of the promise?

While we can talk about further revelation that was necessary before the Messiah could come and the unique possibilities for dissemination of the message that the Roman Empire would make possible, the ultimate answer to that question rested in the mind of God. The only point is that those to whom these promises were made never saw their fulfillment. Nevertheless, some of them waited with faith undimmed for God's time to be fulfilled. Thus, when Christ came, there were people like Anna and Simeon, who were ready to recognize him (Luke 2:25–38). They were the end of a long line of people who had waited confidently, and in the end, their faith was not disappointed (Isa. 49:23).

Contemporary Significance

WAITING. We too are called to live with that confident expectation that is the expression of faith and trust. Waiting believingly is our way of

relinquishing control of our lives (see comments on ch. 32). When we rush ahead to solve our problems in our own way without waiting on God to show us how he wants to deal with those problems, we have effectively said to him that we know better than he does and we are better able to solve the problem than he is. This is why Jesus required his disciples to wait in Jerusalem for him to fill them with his Holy Spirit. They and their devices were not the way to carry out Jesus' command to make disciples of all nations. God was going to use them in dramatic ways to fulfill that purpose, but it was going to be in his way and through his power, not theirs.

But not only are we called upon to wait on God in the daily round of our lives. There is another waiting that is incumbent on us, and it is even more in line with what God was asking of the exiles in this passage. We are called upon to wait as they did for the ultimate fulfillment of the promises made here. In many ways we have seen them fulfilled. All the nations have flowed to Jerusalem and have poured out their wealth and devotion on the city of Zion, the church of the living God. The number of Abraham's descendants has swelled into the billions. Those who have set out to destroy God's people have ended up by destroying themselves.

But we still wait for the final establishment of God's kingdom on earth. That is the confident expectation to which Christ calls his followers. The question of Luke 18:8 is still addressed to us today: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" In other places, he spoke of the need not to lose focus in our waiting for his return. He spoke of the "foolish virgins," who were not prepared for the bridegroom's coming (Matt. 25:1–13). He spoke of those who got busy doing other things and were not ready (Matt. 24:36–44).

Already in the years immediately after Jesus' return to heaven, some lost hope and said he was not coming back. The question for us is whether we will remain in that sort of line that culminated in Anna and Simeon, or whether we will lose hope and effectively finish the line for our family and our descendants. God promises not to disappoint those who wait for him. But that means continuing to wait for as long as he decrees and not losing hope in the meantime.

Accepting God's love. Part of the reason that some of the exiles lost hope was that they could not really believe in God's love for them. Undoubtedly there were a number of different types of thinking in that

- group. (1) Some frankly thought that God had treated them unfairly. After all, the people of Judah were not that bad, and there were other people around them who were at least as bad, maybe worse (cf. Hab. 1). Moreover, if their parents had been so bad, as bad as the prophets insisted they had been, then God should have punished them and not their "innocent" children (Ezek. 18). So this group would say, "If God loves us so much, we shouldn't be in this mess at all" (cf. Isa. 40:27).
- (2) Others admitted that God had treated them fairly. This generation was just as unfaithful as the preceding ones had been, and God had given them exactly what was coming to them. Being as bad as they were and having failed God so miserably, they could not imagine that God could ever love a people such as them.
- (3) Finally, there were those who said, in effect, "So what?" These people looked at their circumstances and concluded that the situation was hopeless. Whether they had gotten into this fairly or unfairly was beside the point. The point was that there was no way out. So God could say he loved them all he wanted, but it simply would do no good.

Those same groups of people exist today. In every way possible God is saying that he loves us and wants us in fellowship with himself. He promises to give us spiritual abundance and fruitfulness. But we cannot truly "hear" his words in the sense of receiving them. (1) Some of us say, "If God really loved me, he would not have allowed me to be born into this abusive family." Or, "If God really loved me, he would not have made me poor." Or, "If God really loved me, he wouldn't have let me get pregnant when we were not married." (2) Others say, "God can't love me, not after what I've done." Or, "God can't love me when I just keep on sinning after I said I wouldn't do it again." Or, "God can't love me; I am just so worthless. Nothing I say or do is worth anything." (3) Finally, others say, "It doesn't make any difference whether God loves me or not; my situation is hopeless. He can't do anything about this."

To all of these God says the same things as he said 2,700 years ago: He can no more forget us than a mother can forget her nursing baby. And we have even more evidence of that truth than Isaiah did, for when he speaks of our names as being "engraved on the palms of my hands" (49:16), we think of the nail scars in the hands of God's Son. When he has done that for us, how could he forget us?

- (1) To those among us who believe they have been treated unfairly, he calls them to face their own liability in their situation. Undoubtedly there were individual Judeans who truly did not deserve the Exile. They were people of faith who had been living in obedience to God, yet this terrible thing happened to them (e.g., Daniel and his three friends, and Ezekiel). But the question in that circumstance is not "Why?" and holding God hostage for an answer. Rather, it is, "What now?" and looking to God for resources to go on. For such persons, God's affirmation of love will be their lifeblood as they seek to cope with the "unfairness" of life. The fact is that we are part of a much larger web of cause and effect than simply our own actions, and if circumstances do not turn out as we might wish, that is no indication that God does not love us or care for us.
- (2) The second group longs for God's love and forgiveness but simply cannot believe that God can forgive them for what they have done. This is often a reverse form of pride: "What I have done is too much for God." It is often also the expression of an inability to forgive oneself. If I am this disappointed in myself, think how infinitely more disappointed God is. What is called for is a radical surrender of oneself into God's hands. Of course he is disappointed, but that does not change the fact of his love. In the humiliation of admitting that ours is not the worst sin in the world and that our disappointment in ourselves is not the issue, there is a possibility of realizing that God wants to forgive us if we will only let him. In receiving that forgiveness, there is finally the possibility of forgiving ourselves.
- (3) The situation of the third group is much the same as that of the second: If God's love is to be experienced, it must be surrendered to. The pride that says "My situation is hopeless" is one that refuses to believe God is greater than anything this world can present to him. What God asks for is the opportunity to try. He asks us to test him in faith, not in doubt, and to allow him to show us the love he has for us and to demonstrate that love can conquer any obstacle it meets. His arm is not too short to ransom us, nor does he lack the strength to rescue us (50:2).

Isaiah 50:4-51:8

⁴THE SOVEREIGN LORD has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary.

He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught.

⁵The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back.

⁶I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;

I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.

⁷Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced.

Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame.

⁸He who vindicates me is near.

Who then will bring charges against me?

Let us face each other!

Who is my accuser?

Let him confront me!

⁹It is the Sovereign LORD who helps me. Who is he that will condemn me? They will all wear out like a garment:

They will all wear out like a garment; the moths will eat them up.

10Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the word of his servant?Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light,

trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God.

¹¹But now, all you who light fires and provide yourselves with flaming torches,

go, walk in the light of your fires and of the torches you have set ablaze.

This is what you shall receive from my hand:

You will lie down in torment.

51:1"Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the LORD:

Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn;

²look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth.

When I called him he was but one, and I blessed him and made him many.

³The LORD will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins;

he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the LORD.

Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing.

4"Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation:
The law will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations.

⁵My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way,

and my arm will bring justice to the nations.

The islands will look to me and wait in hope for my arm.

⁶Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies.

But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail.

7"Hear me, you who know what is right, you people who have my law in your hearts:Do not fear the reproach of men

Do not fear the reproach of men or be terrified by their insults.

8 For the moth will eat them up like a garment; the worm will devour them like wool. But my righteousness will last forever, my salvation through all generations."

Original Meaning

ONCE AGAIN THE SERVANT is introduced, and as in 49:1–6, he speaks in the first person (50:4–9). This is followed, as in chapters 42 and 49, with a commentary (50:10–51:8). There are two connections with the preceding section: the contrast between the transgressions of Israel (50:1) and the obedience of the Servant (50:5), and the fourfold repetition of "the Sovereign LORD."

As far as the structure of the present section is concerned, 49:14–50:3 had insisted that the Sovereign Lord (cf. 49:22) has both the power and the will to deliver his people from their sin. But how will he do so? According to 50:4–9, he will do it through the obedience of his Servant, even if it means the Servant must suffer to accomplish the Sovereign Lord's purpose.

Then 50:10–11, with its comment on the Servant's words, provides the transition into the body of the commentary (51:1–8). Those who "obey the word of his servant" (lit., "listen to the voice of his servant"; note the recurrence of "listen" in 51:1, 4, 7) will have light, while those who manufacture their own light will find destruction. The Servant will speak a message to which those who are seeking God's "righteousness" will listen (51:1). His "justice" (not theirs) will be a light to the nations (51:4; cf. 42:1; 49:6), and in him they will find "salvation" (51:8).

The Obedience of the Servant (50:4–9)

THIS THIRD OF the so-called "Servant Songs" reveals yet more clearly that the servant's obedience to the Lord will result in suffering for him. This "servant" is clearly not the nation of Israel, since they did not suffer because of their obedience but because of their rebellion.²

There is also a further indication (cf. 49:2) that the Servant will reveal God through speech. His "ears" have been "opened" to hear God's message (50:5), and his "tongue" has been "instructed" (50:4) how to declare it. But if the message is declared, there is going to be abuse (50:6), and the Servant is willing to bear that abuse because he knows that God will vindicate him in the end (50:7–9). No one will be able to successfully accuse him of either disobeying God or of falsifying the message. Nor will those who "beat" him and pull out his "beard" be able to make him stop obeying his Lord. In fact, his accusers will be unable to stand at the end.

The certainty that the Lord will "vindicate" him in the end means that the Servant has the courage to be obedient, setting his "face like flint" to do his Master's will. The emphasis on the servant's speech reminds us of what is said about the Messiah elsewhere. He will "strike the earth with the rod of his mouth" (11:4), and "the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor" (61:1).

Words of Transition (50:10–11)

THIS BRIEF INTRODUCTION to the commentary on the Servant's words highlights the emphasis on obedience to his message that will be prominent in the commentary proper (51:1–9). It also contains a significant synonymous parallel between the Lord and the Servant. To "fear the LORD" is synonymous with obeying "the word of his servant," and vice

versa (50:10). Once again, this "servant" cannot be the nation but someone else, One who brings God's word to the nation. Nor is it the prophet, for to obey the prophet's word is not synonymous with fearing the Lord. More and more clearly, this Servant is in a unique position.

Clearly, one's response to the Servant is in the nature of a watershed. Those who have "no light" can walk safely if they will entrust themselves to God in the way that he has revealed. But those who reject God's revealed way and try to manufacture their own light will find that the way they have chosen leads to "torment" (50:11). Furthermore, to listen to the Servant is to "trust" God, while refusing to listen to what he says is tantamount to refusing to trust God.

A Commentary on the Servant's Words (51:1–8)

THESE VERSES EXPAND on the theme of "listening to/obeying" the words of the Servant. The ones being addressed are those among the Judeans who are inclined to put their trust in God. The others have been dismissed in 50:10. But these are addressed as those who "pursue righteousness" and "seek the LORD" (51:1) and those "who know what is right" and "have my law in your hearts" (51:7). The message that the Servant will reveal is for them—and it is a message of deliverance. But as noted in the introductory comments on chapters 49–55, the deliverance here is not primarily from Babylon. Instead, it has both a universal (51:4–6) and a timeless (51:6, 8) quality.

This fact emphasizes again that Israel's primary problem is not captivity in foreign lands. Rather, their ultimate problem is the same as that of the whole human race: alienation from God. Deliverance from Babylon without this other deliverance will accomplish little. Unless God can find a way to deliver from the bondage to sin that produces injustice and oppression, there is no final hope for humanity. Furthermore, it is plain that God's deliverance goes beyond sincere obedience and well-motivated living. If those qualities of life could take away divine-human alienation, there would be no need for further deliverance. But in fact, it is particularly persons with those characteristics who will be able to receive that further deliverance. Their heartfelt commitment to the law of God does not deliver them from their alienation, but it means they are in a position to receive that deliverance if they will.

The commentary may be divided into three stanzas: 51:1–3, 4–6, and 7–8.4 (1) In verses 1–3 God and the Servant call on the righteous ("Listen to me") to look back. They are invited to remember God's dealings with Abraham in election love (v. 2) and behind that to recognize the creative power that brought the world into existence in the first place. If the Israelites are tempted to despair over God's willingness to restore them, God points them to their origins as a people. He took a single couple and from them brought a whole nation. Surely he will not abandon them now. Nor is there any question about his power to do so. The God who brought the world into existence will have no problem in restoring the "ruins" of "Zion."

The particular imagery for creation used in 51:3 is significant. Here it is not the founding of the earth and the stretching out of the heavens that is so frequently used in this part of the book. Instead, the creative activity that resulted in a garden is emphasized. Isaiah's point is that the Creator originally created a world of beauty, harmony, and blessing. Yahweh is not merely the Creator; he created the world with the specific plan in mind of blessing. So if God is characterized by election love and creative power for blessing, his people need not fear that they will be left in the ruins and despair that their sins have created. The lessons of the past are clear: The Lord is a God of "comfort," "compassion," and power, and he will not rest until the world is once more a place of "joy and gladness," "thanksgiving," and "singing."

(2) The next stanza begins as the first did, with a call to "listen." The emphasis here is the universal and eternal work of the Servant. This deliverance that will be accomplished is not merely for the children of Abraham but for the children of Adam, as 49:6 made plain. Not only will the people of Israel wait for the mighty arm of God's deliverance to be revealed (51:5; cf. 50:2; 51:9; 52:10; 53:1), but indeed the whole earth waits. The "law" of God and the "justice" that is a consequence of it will go out to all the nations and become the light that the Servant brings to the "Gentiles" (42:6; 49:6). What God will do for his people truly has universal impact.

Furthermore, the "salvation" God is offering is beyond the limits of time and space. It will have relevance even when "the heavens" and "the earth" cease to exist and when all the inhabitants of earth have died. It could be

argued that this is merely hyperbolic language, but even if that were granted, the point cannot be denied that something beyond mere deliverance from Babylon and the restoration of earthly Zion is being talked about.⁵

(3) The third stanza of the commentary on the third Servant Song also begins with a call to listen (51:7). There are words both by and about the Servant that especially those who are seeking God need to hear. They need to be encouraged (comforted) by the assurance that God has not abandoned them and that their commitments to know God and to do his will have not been in vain. They need this encouragement because of the persistent fact that a fallen world has nothing but "reproach" and "insults" for those trying to live the life of the holy God.

What God wants them to hear is that the reproaches and the insults are being spoken by those who are passing away like garments eaten by moths (51:8). In other words, all of that will pass, and pass more quickly than they might think. But the righteous salvation of God will endure forever (cf. 40:8). Note that this same figure was also used by the Servant (50:9). The servants may share the same confidence as their Servant, and sharing it, they need not lose hope, even in the midst of the uncertainties of hope deferred and mockery from a lost world.

Bridging Contexts

To LIVE, AND more than that, to speak, for God is to invite abuse. This passage begins and ends on that note. The Servant does nothing but obediently speak the words he has been instructed to speak (50:4–5), and the next thing that happens is that he is offering his back to those who beat him (50:6). There is no explicit connection between the two, but the fact is there. To speak for God is to be abused. At the end of this passage (51:7–8), those who love God's law experience the same thing. In both cases, the anchor that is offered to hold both the Servant and the servants is the righteousness of God, which will in the end vindicate his own.

Believers are persecuted throughout the Bible and up to the present. While it should not be surprising if the unbelieving world does so, it is extremely disheartening when the abuse comes from those who consider themselves to be believers as well. But it is a fact of life. In the first incident reported after the fall of humanity in the garden, Abel is killed by Cain

because Abel's faith was vindicated and Cain's was not (Gen. 4). It continues with Joseph, who was attacked and sold into slavery by brothers jealous of God's promises for his life (Gen. 37:19–20). Unless God had intervened to save their lives, Joshua and Caleb would have been stoned because they challenged the people to believe that the land could be taken with God's help (Num. 14:10).

This pattern continued on through Israel's history, with the prophets in particular coming in for abuse and murder. Thus, Jesus could say that the Jews had shed the blood of the prophets from the beginning of the world until the present generation (Luke 11:51). It is in that light that he said to his disciples, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me" (Matt. 5:11). To Jesus, the ultimate evidence that disciples were being faithful to him was their being persecuted (cf. John 15:18–16:4).

This was certainly the case with the apostle Paul. He could testify that he had been beaten, stoned, and imprisoned because of his faith (2 Cor. 11:23–26). It has also been true of Christians through the ages. We think of those who died in the Colosseum as the quintessential martyrs, but they are only the beginning of an endless line up to and including Sudanese Christians, who are being slaughtered and enslaved even as these words are being written.

In the context of Isaiah 50:4–9, it is important to notice that Jesus was not so much abused for what he did as for what he said. If he had not claimed to be the Son of God, if he had not pronounced judgment on the religious leadership, and if he had not said he alone was the Way, he might not have been put to death. Words and language are at the heart of God's revelation. He spoke blessing on his creatures (Gen. 1:28) and laid down the terms of life in the Garden of Eden in explicit language. The experience of the prophets with God was profoundly linguistic in nature: God had a message for his people and was determined to communicate it to them. Jesus Christ, the Servant, is the ultimate communication of God to humans.

Thus, John's inspired labeling of Christ as "the Word" could not have been more apropos, though this is not to say that in Jesus communication was only his being and that verbal communication was no longer necessary. Hardly! No one can read the Gospels and believe that. Jesus spoke, and it was in part precisely because he spoke that he died. But he could die in

confidence because he knew that the Word of God is one of eternal salvation and that Word will never pass away (cf. Isa. 40:8; 55:11).

Contemporary Significance

WE TODAY HARDLY THINK of persecution as a sign of blessedness. We think we are blessed when all people speak well of us. But in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says that such a thing is not a good sign, for it means we are no longer "salt" and "light." We no longer stand out from the unbelieving crowd, and what we say and do no longer brings what the crowd does and says under obvious condemnation.

We believers in North America have been largely free of persecution for three hundred years, and it has dulled us to the reality of life. Surely some Western believers have suffered for their faith, but they are isolated instances. The majority of us have even experienced favored status as the government was for years peopled with at least nominal believers. That is changing today, and most of us are unprepared for it. Some preachers are still calling people to become Christians so that they may become rich, prominent, and comfortable. Books that seem to offer a biblical "mantra" that can produce abundance merely by repeating it daily sell in the millions.

That is not the message of Isaiah 50:4–51:8, nor is it, I am convinced, the message of Christ. It is certainly not the experience of millions of Christians around the world. We are called to submissive obedience, knowing perfectly well that in the short term this will probably mean we will not be as comfortable, wealthy, powerful, or prominent as we might be otherwise. But we must "set our faces like flint" (cf. 50:7) to obey God at all costs, following in the footsteps of our Master. We do so, not with long faces and self-inflicted mortification but with joy. That joy is both because we know we are living in the way our Creator intended and because we know that in the end, faith will be vindicated and unfaith unmasked for the tragedy it is.

For us Christians this faith is a good deal easier than it was for the people in Isaiah's day. We have seen the promises of the Servant/Messiah fulfilled. Isaiah had the Servant say that he knew his obedience would be vindicated; we have seen that to be the case. Not only has the promised Servant come, living as Isaiah and the other prophets foresaw, but he has also been vindicated by the Father in incredible ways. When he left the earth, he left

behind at most 120 followers. By all the laws of reason that group should have dwindled to nothing in a matter of months. Far from it! Today his followers number more than one billion and can be found on every continent. His faith and obedience have been vindicated, so we can walk in the same way with confidence.

But this passage says even more to us. It is not merely the example of the Servant that we follow. The worldwide, eternal salvation that the Servant proclaimed is ours. To be sure, we continue to walk in faith as we look to the final consummation of creation when the blessing of Eden returns to creation without the curse of sin. But we have seen the birth of the promised seed of Abraham and have received the Holy Spirit, who is the down payment on the final payment of that blessing. Therefore, those who seek God today and attempt to live in the light of his covenant commands can draw even further strength from the lessons taught here. We too can look back on the goodness of the Creator's intent and on the election love of Abraham's friend. But we can also look back on the coming of the promised Servant, the Son of the Father. With those things to look back on, we can look ahead with confidence.

Our looking ahead should be with even greater confidence than those exiles in Babylon were able to muster. We have seen the down payment on that universal, timeless salvation. Sin has been defeated through the death and resurrection of Christ, and all that is necessary to reconcile humans to the Father has been accomplished. In that light, it ought to be many times easier for us to believe in that final day when every knee will bow and proclaim that Christ is Lord. It ought to be much easier to look forward confidently to the new heaven and the new earth that Isaiah promises us (65:17–25). With that kind of confidence—not the arrogant confidence of conquerors but the humble confidence of the redeemed—we in the West ought to be able to face any persecution and hatred that will come with the same kind of quiet endurance that our brothers and sisters in the rest of the world have manifested and continue to do.

Isaiah 51:9–16

⁹AWAKE, AWAKE! CLOTHE yourself with strength,
 O arm of the LORD;
 awake, as in days gone by,

as in generations of old.

Was it not you who cut Rahab to pieces, who pierced that monster through?

¹⁰Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep,

who made a road in the depths of the sea so that the redeemed might cross over?

¹¹The ransomed of the LORD will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads.

Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

12"I, even I, am he who comforts you. Who are you that you fear mortal men,

the sons of men, who are but grass,

13that you forget the LORD your Maker,
who stretched out the heavens
and laid the foundations of the earth,

that you live in constant terror every day because of the wrath of the oppressor, who is bent on destruction?

For where is the wrath of the oppressor?

14The cowering prisoners will soon be set free;

they will not die in their dungeon, nor will they lack bread.

15For I am the LORD your God,

who churns up the sea so that its
waves roar—
the LORD Almighty is his name.

16I have put my words in your mouth
and covered you with the shadow of
my hand—
I who set the heavens in place,
who laid the foundations of the earth,
and who say to Zion, 'You are my
people.'"

Original Meaning

Assuming I am correct that 50:10–51:8 is a commentary on 50:4–9,¹ Isaiah 51:9–16 opens the unit that stands between the third and the fourth so-called "Servant Songs." This unit (51:9–52:12) progresses through three stages from question to affirmation: 51:9–16 deals with the uncertainty over why God has not yet acted; 51:17–23 affirms that it is now Zion's oppressors who will suffer; 52:1–12 announces the imminent deliverance from captivity. Each of these sections begins with the repeated call "Awake, awake," and the motif of the "arm of the LORD" both opens and closes the unit (51:9; 52:10).

Isaiah 51:9–11 presents the question and 51:12–16 gives the Lord's answer. The opening verses have some of the characteristics of a community lament in that they express both doubt and hope. There is the hope now and even the confidence (v. 11) that the Lord will intervene and redeem his people from their sin and its effects. The despair and the hopelessness seen in 40:27 and 49:14 have been somewhat mitigated. Yet there remains the nagging question, "Why hasn't the Lord acted on our behalf long before now?" After all, he was the One who redeemed Israel from Egypt, so there is no question of his ability. None of the powers of evil in the world can stop him, so it is time for that mighty arm (cf. 51:5) to swing into action.²

At the same time, as in the lament form, there is the confidence that God will indeed act. In language reminiscent of 35:10, Isaiah 51:11 looks forward to the day when "the ransomed" will return to "Zion with singing."

So the captives to sin no longer doubt that God will act, but they wonder why he is waiting so long.

God does not directly answer the question, but he does respond by calling on the captives to be sure that their focus is on him and not on their oppressors.³ The double "I" in 51:12 highlights this emphasis. He is the Creator of all things. Why should they pay more attention to mortals, who are little more than "grass" (51:12; cf. 40:6–8; Ps. 56:4, 11), than to the eternal Creator, who is also the One who seeks to "comfort" them?

There is no point in focusing on the "oppressor" (Isa. 51:13), because he will soon be gone. He may be "bent on destruction," but he is not the ruler of the world, and the One who does rule asserts that the "prisoners will not die in their dungeon" (51:14). Far better to focus on the Comforter, to whom both the seen and the unseen worlds bow in obedience (51:15). The way in which God's creative power and election love will come together to redeem Zion from her sin can be seen in the Servant. As elsewhere in the book, the Servant's ministry is to reveal God. He will declare God's words, and nothing will be able to thwart those plans for him.

Bridging Contexts

THE CRIES OF the oppressed for justice and deliverance have hardly ever been heard so loudly as in the twentieth century. The brutality of oppressors was not new, but science and industry gave them an ability to extend and multiply their oppressive force in previously unheard-of ways. As a result, we have had the terrors of Auschwitz and the "killing fields" of Cambodia. In situations such as these, the cry comes again, "Awake, awake, O arm of the LORD." And again, there comes the question, "How long, O LORD?" Why does God not act on behalf of his people, or if they are not his people in particular, at least on behalf of the helpless and downtrodden, whom the Bible declares have a special place in the heart of God?

If there were an easy answer to this question, it would have been given long ago, and there would be no more books on the problem of evil. But, as in the book of Job, the Bible does not answer the question. What it does is to offer us an alternative. We can serve a good, all-powerful Creator, who does do justly in the long term and who will ultimately balance all the books; the only other option is to have a world in which we and our abilities

are supreme. A wise person will certainly choose the former, as Job did, for to choose the latter is not to answer the question but to render it, and indeed all questions, mere gibberish. If there is a good and just God, then we have hope that indeed oppression can be, and will be, overcome. But if we are ultimate, then an honest view of history must tell us there is no hope at all.

Contemporary Significance

THE BIBLICAL LAMENT is a wonderful piece of literature insofar as it bridges two attitudes in life that are often treated as excluding each other: doubt and hope. The result of this exclusion is that people are often deprived of the encouragement and assurance that can be theirs. We are often told that if you entertain doubts, you do not have faith and hope is impossible for you. As a result, there are people who never face their doubts and are forced to live lives of denial and superficiality. By contrast, there are those whose doubts are undeniable and who therefore conclude that faith is impossible for them. Both kinds of persons need to look carefully at passages such as this and at the longer laments in the Psalms (e.g., Ps. 6; 22).

What the laments show us is that doubt and faith are *not* mutually exclusive. But it may be helpful at the outset to draw a distinction. There is a kind of doubt that demands proof before it will be surrendered. Perhaps this is what the writer of James has in mind when he says that we "must believe and not doubt" (James 1:6). But there is also a kind of doubt that bespeaks uncertainty and sincerely seeks reasons to believe. So the man said to Jesus, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). It is in this latter case that the laments come to bear.

Too often we think that to have any questions about God or his actions is to have no faith. Conversely, if we really had faith, we would have no anxieties. Laments like this one in Isaiah show us that this is not the case. We may be certain that God will in the end answer all our prayers and bring us to Zion with singing. But at the same time we may be in deep anguish over God's prolonged failure to act. That anguish does not mean that our hope is not genuine, but neither does genuine hope mean that we will feel no anguish. We can be honest about our feelings without denying the hope that is truly ours.

But how can we be sure that our questions and uncertainties do not overwhelm our hope? Isaiah gives us the key. It lies in our focus. We need not deny the world and all the questions it raises. We need not pretend that all is well when all is far from well. But those things must not become our central focus. If they do, they will overwhelm us. "The oppressor" and his evil purposes will put us under. Rather, our focus must be on our Creator/Redeemer and all that has been revealed about his character, nature, and will. Undoubtedly we will still have questions, and many of them will still be unanswerable, but we will be able to live with them knowing that we know the One in whom all the questions of life have their "Yes" (cf. 2 Cor. 1:20).

Without question, this insight has come out of the furnace of Isaiah's own experience. Why did his preaching actually turn his own generation from God? There is no easy answer for that. But God has given him the key. "Focus on me and my holiness," he said, "and I will be your sanctuary. If you focus on the world, as your compatriots are doing, I will only be a stumbling block to you as I am to them" (cf. Isa. 8:12–14).

Isaiah 51:17–52:12

¹⁷AWAKE, AWAKE! Rise up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the LORD the cup of his wrath, you who have drained to its dregs the goblet that makes men stagger. ¹⁸Of all the sons she bore there was none to guide her; of all the sons she reared there was none to take her by the hand. ¹⁹These double calamities have come upon you who can comfort you? ruin and destruction, famine and sword who can console you? ²⁰Your sons have fainted; they lie at the head of every street, like antelope caught in a net. They are filled with the wrath of the LORD and the rebuke of your God.

²¹Therefore hear this, you afflicted one, made drunk, but not with wine.
²²This is what your Sovereign LORD says, your God, who defends his people:
"See, I have taken out of your hand the cup that made you stagger; from that cup, the goblet of my wrath, you will never drink again.
²³I will put it into the hands of your

tormentors.

who said to you,
'Fall prostrate that we may walk over you.'

And you made your back like the ground, like a street to be walked over."

52:1 Awake, awake, O Zion, clothe yourself with strength.
Put on your garments of splendor, O Jerusalem, the holy city.
The uncircumcised and defiled will not enter you again.

2 Shake off your dust; rise up, sit enthroned, O Jerusalem.
Free yourself from the chains on your neck, O captive Daughter of Zion.

³For this is what the LORD says:

"You were sold for nothing, and without money you will be redeemed."

⁴For this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

"At first my people went down to Egypt to live; lately, Assyria has oppressed them.

5"And now what do I have here?" declares the LORD.

"For my people have been taken away for nothing, and those who rule them mock," declares the LORD. "And all day long my name is constantly blasphemed. ⁶Therefore my people will know my name; therefore in that day they will know that it is I who foretold it. Yes, it is I."

⁷How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news. who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" ⁸Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices: together they shout for joy. When the LORD returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes. ⁹Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. ¹⁰The LORD will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations,

11 Depart, depart, go out from there!
Touch no unclean thing!
Come out from it and be pure,
you who carry the vessels of the

and all the ends of the earth will see

the salvation of our God.

12But you will not leave in haste or go in flight;for the LORD will go before you,

LORD.

the God of Israel will be your rear guard.

Original Meaning

Now God Turns the tables on his people. In 51:9, they had called on him to step up and bring to reality the promises he had been making. If their sins were really to be defeated and they were to be restored to God's favor, then let it happen! Awake, awake! But now God says it is not for him to awake but for them. Twice (51:17; 52:1) he says it is they who must rise up and take by faith what is offered to them. It is not a question of needing to persuade God to do what he is reluctant to do. Rather, it is a question of the people's developing and maintaining such a faith that when God acts, they will be ready to receive what he has done.

As noted in the comments on 51:9–16, these two sections (51:17–23 and 52:1–12) are a development of the promise made in response to the call for action in 51:9–10. In 51:17–23 God declares that Zion's punishment is now ended and that the things the nations visited on her will now be visited on them. In 52:1–12 the tone of anticipation becomes more intense as God calls on Jerusalem to do the very opposite of what Babylon was required to do in chapter 47. There Babylon was called to go down from the throne and sit in the dust in rags. Here Jerusalem is to "put on your garments of splendor," "shake off your dust," and "sit enthroned" (52:1–2). This section goes on to say that God's honor is at stake because the nations claim he cannot deliver his people (52:5–6). Therefore, he will "bare his holy arm" (52:10) and deliver them in the sight of "all the ends of the earth." In a climactic conclusion God calls on his people to "depart" with all deliberate speed, knowing that God goes both before and behind them (52:11–12).

One of the recurring images of Scripture is the "cup of wrath," found from Psalms through Revelation. Its origins may have been in the idea of one person's intentionally getting another person drunk in order to reduce sexual inhibitions (cf. Hab. 2:15). But the cup also symbolized the sum total of a person's allotted experience (Ps. 16:5). So those who have sinned against God must drink the cup that their sins have filled up. In Israel's case, that cup was the apparent destruction of her heritage. With the destruction of the northern kingdom and then the southern kingdom, it

looked as if the mother would die alone, her children dead and destroyed (Isa. 51:18–20). But now, God says, the day of destruction is past, and the cup of God's wrath is placed in the hands of the "tormentors" for them to drink (51:23). As elsewhere in the book, although the enemy nations were used by God to punish his people, they too are accountable for their proud and cruel behavior.²

Isaiah 52:1–12 represents the climax of God's promises not to allow his people to remain alienated from himself. Although the imagery of captivity and release is central to the promises, it is significant that Babylon itself is not mentioned. This suggests again that it is not merely physical captivity that is the problem God must solve.

This segment falls naturally into two parts. In 52:1–6, just as God demonstrated his unique deity in delivering his people from Egypt, so he will do again in delivering them from this new bondage (52:4–6). Once again, an important piece of evidence for that uniqueness is his ability to predict the whole thing in advance (52:6). Jerusalem will be transformed from slave to queen (52:1–2), and the transformation will not be the result of some deal between God and the captors (52:3). He was not forced to sell them into slavery in the first place, and there is no one who can stand up to him and demand payment for their return.

The second part of this climactic unit (52:7–12) brings to a conclusion all that has been said about redemption, not only since 49:1 but indeed since 40:1.3 Both the ability and the desire of God to restore his people to himself have been amply demonstrated; all that remains is for the paeans of song (52:9) to begin. As is so typical of this book, Isaiah utilizes a graphic illustration to conclude the point. He pictures a besieged city waiting for news from a delivering army. Will the army be able to break through the besiegers? If so, there is hope; if not, all is lost.

Suddenly, the watchmen on the walls of the city begin to "shout for joy" (52:8). They have seen a messenger far away on the mountain, and he is signaling the "good news" (52:7) of victory. God has bared "his holy arm," defeated the enemy, and "redeemed Jerusalem." Nothing remains but for Israel to lay hold of this promise in faith and to leave behind the old way with its sin and uncleanness. Nor is this to be some furtive sneaking off, lest the enemy discover what is happening and prevent it. No, the enemy is

completely defeated and can do nothing to retain its hold on the former captives. They are free, free indeed, through the power of God.

Bridging Contexts

MODERN PARALLELS. It is hard to imagine a clearer example of God's causing Israel's enemies to drink the cup they had once forced on Israel than that of modern Germany. From the *Kristallnacht* in the early 1930s, when the windows of Jewish-owned stores were smashed and the goods looted, through the terrible destruction of the Warsaw ghetto, through the degradation and terror of the death camps, Germany made the Jewish people drink a cup of almost unimaginable horror.

Whether God permitted this because of the Jewish people's refusal to recognize Jesus as Messiah is highly debatable, but the parallels with the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles are noteworthy. It is clear that God held the German people accountable for what they had done. The great German cities, the flower of European culture, were razed to the ground, from Hamburg to Dresden. The cup had been taken from the hands of the helpless Jews and put into the hands of the all-conquering Germans. The end came when the Red Army raped its way into Berlin. That was the final straw of degradation and humiliation. If Germany was permitted to do what it did by God, it was not able to escape his justice in the end.

A further parallel between the events of 1930–1950 and those described by Isaiah is the recognition of the Jewish state. It is possible that the Jewish state may never have been recognized if it were not for the shame of the Western powers over their silence concerning the Holocaust and if it were not for the influx of Jewish survivors into Palestine after World War II. Thus, the Nazi attempt to exterminate the Jews actually resulted in their becoming established in their own land again after nearly two thousand years of wandering. What the enemy intended for destruction was actually turned into hope, and the destruction that the enemy intended was visited back on himself.

A parallel event to what Isaiah pictures in 52:7–9 also occurred during World War II. During the so-called Battle of the Bulge in December 1944, the American forces in the Belgian city of Bastogne were surrounded by the German troops. The American situation seemed hopeless, but they refused

to surrender. Everything depended on whether the American Third Army, some hundred miles south of Bastogne, could force its way northward over snow-clogged roads and in the face of desperate German defenses. The Third Army commander, General George Patton, is said to have told his tank commanders, "Do whatever you have to, just keep going." That is just what they did, in one case outflanking the Germans by taking a road the Germans considered impassable and had not fortified. When American defenders met the American attackers on the outskirts of Bastogne, there were shouts of excitement. The siege was broken, and the faith of those who refused to surrender was justified.

Contemporary Significance

GOD TO THE DEFENSE. This passage speaks of those who are powerless to defend themselves. The picture is of a widow who hopes to depend on her children to help her as the contents of the cup she is forced to drink leaves her staggering, but she has no children to take her hand, to help her. Her children too have fallen under the blows, and she is left alone, helpless. But, as a matter of fact, that is not the case. The "therefore" at the opening of 51:21 is significant. Precisely because there is no other help, "your God, who defends his people," will take action.

This enunciates an important spiritual principle. Contrary to that favorite aphorism "God helps those who help themselves," the Bible tells us that God helps those who cannot help themselves. This is the one aspect of the repeated admonition in Isaiah and elsewhere: "Wait on the LORD." It is often only when we have come to the end of all of our resources that we are able to turn to the Lord in faith and receive what he wants to do for us. This is surely a part of the reason why God placed Abraham and Sarah in a position of being utterly dependent on him, even to the extent of not knowing where they were going.

But why? Why does God wait until we are helpless, or at least aware of our helplessness before he acts? One of the main reasons is that we are usually unwilling to give up our control of the situation until we come to that extremity. That is what happened to Jacob. It was not until he had done everything he could and was finally in a place where he had no other resources that he was able to become utterly serious with God (Gen. 32:22–

32). In a real sense this was the same situation with Hezekiah. Only after Sennacherib had taken Hezekiah's tribute and still refused to lift the siege on Jerusalem was Hezekiah ready to receive the help God had to offer. Gideon offers us a similar example. With 30,000 men against 100,000, the battle was a difficult proposition, but not an utterly hopeless one. With only 300, it was hopeless. In each of these cases, God's power was available before the final extremity, but it was not until that hour that the central figure was able to lay hold of it.

The same thing is true today. As long as we think the solution to our problems is somehow in ourselves, we are liable to think of God as an assistant or as a fall-back device. But to think of the almighty Creator in such a way is to deprive ourselves of his aid. He is not our servant. This is especially true in regard to our relation to him. As long as we think that we can do something to earn his favor, we are unlikely to cast ourselves on the Savior whom God has provided. We think we don't need a Savior—perhaps a teacher, or an example, or a friend, but not a Savior. This is why Paul takes the first three chapters of the book of Romans to demolish the idea that there is any righteousness in us at all. It is only when we admit that there is nothing we can do for ourselves to remove our sins and our sinning that we will turn to the Savior and receive the forgiveness, cleansing, and empowerment he has been wanting to give us all the time.

Why God acts. Someone has said that if it were not for the people in it, the church would be a wonderful institution. C. S. Lewis addresses this thought when he has Screwtape, a senior devil, instruct his young protégé, Wormwood, whose "subject" has started attending church, to get him to focus on the human foibles of the people worshiping next to him. The fact is that God is as frequently blasphemed (Isa. 52:5) because of the behavior of those who claim to know him as for any other reason. Thus here in Isaiah, God says he must deliver his people from their captivity because their captors are using it as an occasion to blaspheme him. Ezekiel says much the same thing (Ezek. 36:19–20). Thus, God says here that he must raise Jerusalem out of the dust and dress her in splendid garments so that the world will know him for who he really is. A similar thought appears in the New Testament in Ephesians 5:25–27:

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

When we live as captives to sin, we make it appear to the watching world that God is unable to deliver us. When our lives are not marked by his holiness, we make it appear as if he is just one more of the gods, not the unique Creator and Redeemer of the world, whose moral character is unlike that of any of the so-called gods. For us to "know his name" (Isa. 52:6) is not merely to know facts about God and his nature. Rather, it is so to participate in his life that his nature and character become ours. This is what Jesus meant when he prayed, "Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave to me—so that they may be one as we are one" (John 17:11).

The joy of redemption. Isaiah 52:7–12 is about the wonder and the joy of the "good news" of redemption. The early Christians understood that their message about Jesus Christ was the ultimate "good news," and they realized that the "good news" referred to in such Old Testament passages as this one found their ultimate meaning in Christ. But why was this message of God's coming "good news"? It was only so because the people in the besieged city realized the terrible danger in which they stood. If they had been stoutly denying that they were in any danger, the news of God's breaking through the enemy lines would have been treated not as good news but as useless news, or even worse, as bad news. What right does God have to come barging into our city? We are getting along very well, thank you.

In other words, a prerequisite for hearing good news may be first of all that we receive the true bad news. So John Wesley said to his young preachers, "Preach the Law until they are convicted, then preach Grace until they are converted." It is great good news to a person who knows he has just fallen out of an airplane to be told he has a parachute. By contrast, if that person is not aware of what is happening to him and does not realize that he is plunging toward the earth at an alarming rate of speed, the news about the parachute will seem irrelevant at best.

A good churchwoman wondered why she had so little a sense of God's grace in her life. She mentioned this to a wise counselor, and the counselor asked her, "When did you first know you were lost?" The woman responded indignantly, "I have never been lost! I have always known God from my earliest childhood." The counselor did not press her, and they went on to other things. But the woman kept thinking about that question. One night a few weeks later, she suddenly woke up in terror. She saw herself hurtling down a dark abyss, unable to stop. She was sure it was a dream and yet she was fully awake. She threw herself down at the side of her bed and cried, "Jesus, save me." Suddenly the vision of the abyss stopped, and she had an incredible sense of being held in strong arms. As she later recounted the story, her face lighted up with a smile: "I didn't know God's grace before because I didn't think I needed it. You can't be found until you know you are lost!"

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

¹³SEE, MY SERVANT will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.

¹⁴Just as there were many who were appalled at him— his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness—

¹⁵so will he sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him.

For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand.

53:1Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

²He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground.

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,

nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

³He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.

Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

⁴Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows,

yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.

⁵But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

⁶We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

⁷He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

⁸By oppression and judgment he was taken away.

And who can speak of his descendants?

For he was cut off from the land of the living;

for the transgression of my people he was stricken.

⁹He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.

¹⁰Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

11 After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.

12 Therefore I will give him a portion

12Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong,

because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors.

For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Original Meaning

ISAIAH 52:1–12 BROUGHT to the climax God's "comfort" (49:13; 51:3, 12, 19; 52:9) of his people in his insistence that their sin has not finally alienated them from him but that he has found a way to bring them back to him. Particularly in Isaiah 50–52 this ability to restore his people, and indeed all people, to himself is referred to as "the arm" of the Lord, an image of his incomparable power (50:2; 51:5, 9; 52:10). So we, the readers, are brought to a fever pitch of anticipation, particularly by the final call in 52:11–12 to leave the unclean and go out from bondage, both led by and followed by the Lord. Clearly, the "arm of the LORD" is about to be revealed.

We have had some hints about this arm in 42:1–6; 49:1–6; and 50:4–9, where God in each case promises to deliver not only his own people but the entire world by means of his obedient Servant. However, there have been increasingly disturbing overtones in these passages. They have not sounded like paeans of victory. To be sure, ultimate victory is promised, but it does

not seem to be through smashing conquest. Rather, it is through an obedient revelation of God¹ in the midst of rejection and abuse.

Those overtones are now amply confirmed in 52:13–53:12. The arm of the Lord looks nothing like our stereotypical conquering hero. Especially after the exultant tone of 52:7–12, the somber notes of the present passage come as a shock. But that means that this section is in this place on purpose. To suggest it is here by accident or because of some obscure word association with the preceding or the following strains credulity beyond the breaking point. Someone, whether author or editor, was trying to make a point by placing this poem between the material of chapter 52 and that of chapter 54. That point is clearly to demonstrate an instrumental relationship between 52:13–53:12 and what both precedes it and follows it. Who is the mighty arm of the Lord (49:1–52:12) who makes possible the glorious invitations found in chapters 54 and 55? By what means is the alienation of sin overcome? The arm of the Lord is the ideal Servant—Israel as he was meant to be.

This poem is divided into five stanzas of three verses each. It moves from an introduction (52:13–15) to the Servant's rejection (53:1–3) to his carrying of "our" sins and transgressions (53:4–6) to the results of that carrying (53:7–9) to a revelation of the atoning nature of the carrying (53:10–12). This careful structuring demonstrates both the care with which the prophet approaches this particular statement and the importance he attaches to it.

Introduction (52:13–15)

THE POEM BEGINS with a note of triumph. The idea behind "act wisely" is to act in such a way as to succeed (thus the NASB's "will prosper"). There is no question about the outcome of the Servant's work. A day will come when the very same words will be used of him ("raised and lifted up") as are used only of God elsewhere in the book (6:1; 57:15). It is important to note that the poem closes on the same note of triumph ("a portion among the great divide the spoils with the strong," 53:12). The spoils belong to the victor. There is a reason why that point is made both at the beginning and the end of the poem. It is because nothing in between looks in the least like victory, certainly not any victory that proud, dominating humans can conceive of.

This anomalous view is presented immediately after the opening words. The disfigurement of the Servant is utterly shocking.² He hardly appears to be human. He is not the attractive figure that so many of the world's conquerors have been or pretended to be. Whether this thought continues into 52:15 depends on what is done with the first main verb in that verse. The meaning of the verb *nzh* in Hebrew is to sprinkle something on something else. But in each of its occurrences, what follows is what is sprinkled, and the indirect object—what is sprinkled upon—is marked by a preposition. Thus, normal syntax would require that here the nations are being sprinkled upon something else.

The absurdity of that picture has prompted the observation that in Arabic there is another root having these consonants, meaning "to startle." This would provide a good parallel to "shut their mouths" (in astonishment), which "sprinkle" does not provide. If we retain the meaning "sprinkle" (NIV and NASB) and assume that the object being sprinkled is not stated, then the sense of 52:15 is that the kings are struck dumb by the thought that the supposed conqueror has actually come to purify the nations by sprinkling something (blood? sacred water?) on them.³ If "startle" is correct (NRSV, REB, JB, CB), the thought carries through from verse 14 to 15. Those to whom the Servant will bring justice are appalled that he will do so by means of his own injury and abuse. They have never "heard" of such a thing, yet now they "see" it.

Rejection of the Servant (53:1–3)

THIS SECOND STANZA continues the discussion of the response to the revelation of the Savior. But now we move beyond the initial astonishment to outright rejection. Isaiah makes it explicit that this Servant is "the arm of the LORD" that had been promised (53:1). But that report is clearly disbelieved. Why? Three reasons are given. (1) He comes onto the scene in a quiet and unassuming way (53:2). (2) He has no extraordinary beauty or attractiveness to draw people to him; his "appearance" was quite ordinary. (3) Finally, he is rejected because he takes on himself the pain and "suffering" of the world (53:3).

This suffering should not be restricted to physical suffering in the light of what else is said in the poem, but neither should it be construed to exclude such suffering, which is often as much the result of sin as murder or warfare

is. But we find pain and suffering disturbing, both because we do not know what to say in sympathy and because it reminds us of our own vulnerability. So we try to ignore it ("hide [our] faces") and not to think about it ("esteemed him not"). The Servant has come to take away the sins of the world, but no one pays any attention to him.

The Servant's Carrying of Sin (53:4–6)

IF THERE WERE any question about why the Servant suffers, these verses answer the question once and for all. Despite what "we" thought, he is not suffering because God has inflicted deserved punishment on him (53:4). It is our suffering that he bore, and it is for "our transgressions" and "our iniquities" that he suffered (53:5). The repetition of first-person plural pronouns hammers home that the Servant has suffered in "our" place.

There has been endless debate about who the first readers understood the "we" to refer to.⁴ It seems plain to me that the obvious referents are the prophet and the people he is addressing. This makes it utterly clear that the people, while remaining the servants of God to bear witness to his saving power, are not the Servant of the Lord who will bring justice and deliverance to the earth (as some claim). Verse 6 drives this point home with imagery. "We," the blind, rebellious people of God (cf. 42:18–25), are the sheep who have gone astray, but he is the one who gets beaten for our willfulness!

The Results of Carrying Our Sin (53:7–9)

THIS STANZA DETAILS the Servant's innocence and submission and the injustice of the treatment he receives. The Servant is now compared to a sheep, and with very different results. In him it is the mild, defenseless nature of the sheep that is the basis of comparison. Although his suffering is manifestly unjust, he accepts it without protest (53:7). It is significant that the only extended metaphor in the poem deals with sheep, the animals of sacrifice.

The injustice of what the Servant suffered is further underlined in 53:8–9. He is deprived of justice, but he is also deprived of "descendants," evidently "cut off" in the prime of life. As a final insult, he is buried with the rich. But is this an insult? Surely the Old Testament frequently treats riches as a blessing from God. But it also has a more ambiguous view of

riches, especially in the Prophets. Isaiah's statement in 5:8, "Woe to you who add house to house and field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land," more accurately reflects the view of such prophets as Hosea and Amos (and Jesus). In their view, riches have all too often been amassed through violence and deceit. The contrastive "though" seems to make clear that that is the sense here. The Servant is buried with the rich even "though" he did not do what they did. As he had not opened his mouth in self-defense (53:7), neither had he opened it in "deceit" (53:9).

The Atoning Nature of the Carrying (53:10–12)

Why have these things happened to the Servant? The answer is given in this final stanza. They were not accidental; they were intended. Moreover, it was God's intention. The opening lines of 53:10 are terrible. What good father could wish for his son to be crushed? It is only possible if there was some unquestionably greater good to be obtained. And what greater good could possibly justify the crushing of the Servant? The answer is given in the second half of the verse. It is when the "life" of the Servant is offered as a sin offering that God's purpose in bringing him to this place is realized ("prosper"). Then will the injustice of being deprived of children and a long life be rectified. The Servant did not come to tell people what God wants; rather, he came to be what God wants for us. But how can someone who has been cut off from the land of the living without descendants ever have these things? It certainly looks as though resurrection is the only answer.

Verse 11 gives a more theological statement of what was accomplished in the Servant's death. It begins by recapping the previous statement, but this time from the Servant's point of view, saying that when his life has been offered up for others, he will "see" it and be "satisfied." The hard struggle will have been worth it.

But what does that struggle accomplish for people who accept it on their own behalf? The second half of verse 11 answers that question in a tightly connected statement. Because the Servant knows God ("by his knowledge") in intimate relationship (see 42:1–6; 49:1–6; 50:4–9) and indeed shares God's own righteousness (lit., "the righteous one, my servant"), he will in turn be able to make many people righteous. How? By bearing "their iniquities," which is clearly what the "suffering of his soul" was about at the beginning of the verse.

Everything is summed up in 53:12, as the opening "therefore" indicates. But it is as though the author does not want anyone to miss the reason for God's ("I") giving the Servant the spoils of victory, because even though the cause has been fully stated in 53:4–11, he restates it again in the closing bicola of the verse. Why does God give his servant the victor's wreath? "Because" he was treated like one of the rebels when he was not and thus could bear their punishment and make "intercession" for them. If there are any remaining question about how the Servant brings God's justice to the world, this verse should clear it up.

Bridging Contexts

SACRIFICE FOR OTHERS. As early as Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40), it has been normal for Christians to understand that Jesus Christ is the Servant about whom Isaiah is speaking in this chapter. Despite myriad attempts to find a figure in the sixth century B.C. who might be the referent in this passage, none has been successful. By contrast, the congruence with Jesus' life is remarkable—so remarkable that those who deny the possibility of predictive prophecy have had to say that Jesus consciously modeled himself on Isaiah's Servant to make it appear that he was the fulfillment of that prophecy. This from a man on whose lips was no deceit!

Jesus did indeed appear on the earth without any kind of fanfare or dominating presence (apart from the celebration of the angels). He was horribly disfigured, as all descriptions of the facts of crucifixion make plain. He did go to his death without any protest about its manifest injustice and without any attempt to defend himself, going so far as to ask Peter if he would have him disobey his Father's will (John 18:11). The prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane makes it clear that his death was indeed the Father's will. And his own words, uttered at the Last Supper, demonstrate that he understood his death to be a substitutionary one: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:28).

Those around him understood it that way as well. John the Baptist's identification of him as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29) cannot be understood in any other way. Likewise,

Peter's sermon that inaugurated the Christian church stresses that baptism in the name of Jesus is "for the forgiveness of sins" (Acts 2:38). Paul makes the point even more explicit when he says in Colossians 1:19–20:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

And it seems clear that the inspiration for the famous "self-emptying" hymn in Philippians 2:5–11 is Isaiah 53, beginning and ending as it does with the Servant's transcendent glory and between those end points the downward staircase that ends at a cross.

But the Philippian passage also reminds us that there is a bridge not merely to the New Testament but to the present as well, for Paul calls his hearers to emulate the attitude that Christ had. Clearly, that attitude was one of self-denial for the sake of others. Just as the Servant did not hold on to the "rights" that were his but cheerfully gave them up so that others might live, so we are called to walk the same road. We too are called upon to consider others better than ourselves so that they can live.

On a secular level, we can think of the man who, having survived a plane crash into the icy waters of the Potomac River, kept refusing offers to pull him out while he assisted others. In the end, it is believed that he himself died. On another level we think of the five young men who wanted so desperately to bring the gospel to the Auca tribe in Ecuador. Misunderstanding their intentions, the Aucas murdered them all. Although the young men had pistols, they refused to use them on their murderers. But the selfless lives of those young men have inspired countless others to live as they lived, and today there are countless thousands who know Christ who would not know him otherwise. So Paul's question to the alleged followers of Christ is whether we are choosing to give up our lives for the sake of others.

Contemporary Significance

ACCEPTING THE OFFERING. There are two levels at which this fourth revelation of the Servant has significance today. Both levels involve our response to what Jesus Christ, the Servant, the mighty arm of the Lord, has done. The first is our response to his self-offering. Verses 4–6 make it perfectly plain that the reason he suffered the abuse and injustice described in verses 7–9 was because of "our" sin. There is a certain anonymity in that plurality. Yes, "we" have sinned and "we" need to repent and do better. But in practice that often means that each of us accepts little responsibility for the sin and its consequences

Yet if I read verse 10 correctly (see comments above), the prophet focuses us down from the comfortable anonymity of the plural into a very direct second singular "you." He says that it is when each of us makes a sin offering of Jesus' life that he will see his children, live a long life, and see the success of his Father's plan for him. It is as though Christ comes to us with his own broken body in his arms and says, "Here, offer me up to the Father as an offering in your place." What will we say?

Another image is suggested by verse 11. We are told that after the suffering of his entire being (nepeš), "he will see and be satisfied." Although the word translated "suffering" is not that used of birth pangs but connotes more the idea of misery or unremitting effort, there is still a parallel to the act of giving birth. I was present in the delivery room when our third child was born. It did not take great reasoning powers to recognize that "natural" childbirth is not the same as "painless" childbirth. Karen, my wife, was fully conscious and was doing all the right things, but pain and struggle were written eloquently on her face and body. Finally, there came the great moment when Peter was born. I confess that I did not think he was very attractive; he was red and wrinkled and yowling. But when the obstetrician laid him on Karen's breast, I watched in wonder as all the pain and struggle washed out of her face and she beamed with love at that little boy. Go through it again? No. Worth it? Yes. That is how it is with Jesus. He "sees" the newborn Christian and is "satisfied." He considers all that it cost him to redeem us as not too much.

But suppose when he offers himself to us, we respond that we don't need a sin offering. Suppose we have rejected the "old-fashioned" idea of sin and consider ourselves to be as worthy as the next person of the blessings of God. What then? It would be as though, after all the labor and struggle, the baby is stillborn. Then indeed it was all for nothing. Then indeed the Savior finds no satisfaction in the offering he made.

Can humans thwart the will of God? Not in any ultimate sense. There will be a new heaven and a new earth, and all the redeemed will inhabit them. There will be a great crowd of the redeemed. But those who are invited first may choose not to come in (Luke 14:16–24). From God's side he has done everything necessary, and "whosoever will may come." But we must accept the offering made on our behalf. Without that "wedding garment" the door of the banquet hall remains closed, and the Savior's sufferings are in vain for us (Matt. 22:11–12).

Living the life. If we have accepted the offering of Christ in our place, there is a further response incumbent on us—the one Paul presents in Philippians 2:5–11. We too are called on to live the Servant's life. That life begins and ends in a sense of triumph. It was precisely because Jesus knew who he was, where he had come from, and where he was going that he was able to move from heaven to a barn, from knowing everything to knowing nothing, from supplying all the world's needs to becoming dependent on the breast of a little refugee girl for his very life. He could lay aside the robes of glory because he knew who he was.

We need that same kind of absolute assurance. A man rushed into church one evening and shouted to those gathered there for the service, "I've read the end of the book! We win!" Those who have the witness of the Holy Spirit that they are the children of God (Rom. 8:16) and who know that their sins are forgiven are those who can overcome the world with love (1 John 5:1–5). They do not need to worry about their "image" or "position." They are free to take the lowest place and to "prosper" there. Their highest concern is to be in tune with their Father's will for their lives. They can confidently give themselves without reservation, facing success with humility and failure with stability, knowing all along that in the end all things are theirs.

That kind of assurance will be necessary for servants because their lot is one of astonishment and rejection. We all want the balm of servanthood, but who can bear its twisted face? The person who gives unstintingly will always be looked at with distrust. "What's her angle? What's he trying to prove?" Who wants to be known as a "goody-goody"? And if you really seek to implement the teachings of Christ, such as love your enemies, it will

not be long before people look on you as not merely strange and unnatural but somewhat subversive.

Perhaps the worst aspect of the cross we are called to bear for Christ's sake is simply being taken for granted. You are pouring out your life for others, and they simply take the cup of water you spent so much time drawing, swig it down, throw the cup on the ground, and go on, without even a look in your direction, let alone a "thank you." They "esteemed him not." If that's what they did to the Master, why should we servants expect to be treated better (John 15:20–21)? So if we are to endure this and not become either cynical and embittered or pious and prudish, there will have to be in us, and singing through us, the song of final triumph.

What is the burden of our servanthood? If we look at the picture of the Servant here, it is clear. We are called upon to bear the griefs and sorrows, the burdens, of those around us. This is hard. It is easier to tell them what the cure for their troubles is. That way we do not have to become involved with them. But that was not the way of the Servant. He did not tell us where to take our burdens. No, he took them.

In a practical way, this means we must help put our shoulders under the grief and sorrow of the AIDS patient, the struggle of the single parent, the confusion of the pregnant teenager. He *bore* our griefs and sorrows. To be sure we cannot bear these in the way the Savior could and can, but we can help those around us carry them to the place where they can be unloaded onto him. In our worst nightmares, we need to see ourselves lifting spotless, pharisaic hems lest the sins and transgressions of the world should besmirch them.

A fact of the Servant's ministry was its apparent failure in the short term. According to Isa. 53:7–9, he died childless in the midst of life, deprived of justice and treated as though he had been violent and deceitful. But he was content if he was simply doing his Father's will. The same must be true for servants today. If we make success as the world counts success our goal, we run the serious danger of losing everything. If we are to walk in the footsteps of Isaiah and of the Son of God, we need to be prepared to leave the outcome of our servanthood in God's hands, bending everything in us to one end, being faithful.

There is nothing wrong with seeking to be a success for God—much better that than trying to be a failure for God! The only issue here is the

subtlety of "success." If success is obedience, that is one thing. But if success defined in this world's terms is the evidence of obedience, that is another thing. Someone has said that if you hope to be a successful megachurch pastor, you cannot talk about sin or money. Yet those are two of the things the Bible talks about most. Suppose Isaiah or the other prophets had never talked about sin. Neither Israel nor the church would exist today. As the Servant was determined to be faithful and to leave the outcome of his service to God, so must we.

Ultimately, of course, our servanthood cannot be redemptive in the way Christ's was. He alone is the Redeemer. That reminds us of the ultimate impossibility of separating the "personal" and the "social" gospel. A "personal" gospel that does not impel us into society is deficient, just as a "social" gospel that does not spring from a transformed person is deficient. On the one hand, when we bear the burdens of a hurting world, our goal is to bear them to Christ. To clothe, to feed, to assist, and yet not to bring persons to a personal knowledge of God through the cross of Christ is to have missed what the good news is about in the first place. On the other hand, simply to help people deal with their guilt while failing to show how sin has effects in all corners of life and failing to help people deal with those effects is not to serve in the way of the Servant.

Isaiah 54:1–17

1"SING, O BARREN woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband," says the LORD.

²"Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes.
 ³For you will spread out to the right and to the left; your descendants will dispossess nations and settle in their desolate cities.

⁴"Do not be afraid; you will not suffer shame.

Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated.

You will forget the shame of your youth and remember no more the reproach of your widowhood.

⁵For your Maker is your husband the LORD Almighty is his name the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth. ⁶The LORD will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and

distressed in spirit—

a wife who married young, only to be rejected," says your God.

⁷"For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back.

⁸In a surge of anger

I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness
I will have compassion on you," says the LORD your Redeemer.

⁹"To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth.

So now I have sworn not to be angry with you,

never to rebuke you again.

¹⁰Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed,

yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken

nor my covenant of peace be removed,"

says the LORD, who has compassion on you.

¹¹"O afflicted city, lashed by storms and not comforted,

I will build you with stones of turquoise,

your foundations with sapphires.

¹²I will make your battlements of rubies, your gates of sparkling jewels, and all your walls of precious stones.

¹³All your sons will be taught by the LORD,

and great will be your children's peace.

¹⁴In righteousness you will be established:
Tyranny will be far from you;
you will have nothing to fear.
Terror will be far removed;
it will not come near you.
¹⁵If anyone does attack you, it will not be my doing;
whoever attacks you will surrender to you.

16"See, it is I who created the blacksmith who fans the coals into flame and forges a weapon fit for its work.
And it is I who have created the destroyer to work havoc;
17 no weapon forged against you will prevail, and you will refute every tongue that accuses you.
This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and this is their vindication from me," declares the LORD.

Original Meaning

As WITH THE THREE other Servant Songs, there is a commentary following the fourth one. But unlike the others, where a song of praise forms the conclusion of the commentary (cf. 42:10–13; 49:13; perhaps 51:7–8), here the entire commentary (chs. 54–55) has a lyrical quality. As I observed at the beginning of the subdivision of Isaiah 49–55 (see comments on ch. 49), the tone of chapters 54–55 reflects the assurance that God's promises to restore his people to himself in chapters 49–52 have come to their fulfillment. Now anticipation changes to invitation and celebration. To be sure, the revelation in God's Son to make this reconciliation possible will not take place for nearly seven hundred years. Nevertheless, the revelation

is now complete, and those who accept the promise can enjoy that reconciliation in advance.

In reality Isaiah 54–55 forms two parts of a single whole. Chapter 54 is a love song by God to Zion, his estranged bride, telling her all the things he is going to do in restoring her. Chapter 55 is the invitation proper, calling on the bride not to miss through unbelief what is hers. Together they constitute one of the most beautiful pieces of literature in the entire Bible.

Restoration and Hope for a Disgraced Woman (54:1–10)

IN THESE TEN VERSES God speaks to Israel in the image of a disgraced woman. She is the barren one (vv. 1–3), the widow (vv. 4–5), the divorced one (vv. 6–8). To each of these, God promises restoration and hope, and the promises are brought to a climax in verses 9–10. In these climactic verses God makes it clear again that the problem being addressed in this section is not captivity in Babylon but alienation from his presence. Here he says that his "unfailing love" and "his covenant of peace" are forever.

This does not mean that Israel will no longer be subject to condemnation and punishment, as later history shows. It means rather that somehow God is now reconciled in himself to his people. Whatever was necessary to satisfy the righteous anger of God at human sin has been done, and God can proclaim that there is no longer any barrier to persons experiencing that reconciliation. Humans need never be separated from him again. Clearly, what was described in 52:13–53:12 is the means to this end.

In the ancient Near East almost the worst fate that could befall a woman was to have no children. This idea runs through the Bible from Genesis to Galatians, where it is the symbol of the inability of human resources to solve either human or human-divine problems. Here (54:1–3) God says that those who have experienced his grace will no longer be fruitless but will live lives of unexpected abundance, with more "descendants" than they can account for.

Widowhood was also considered a disgrace in many parts of the ancient world (54:4). A woman made her contributions to society through her husband, and now she was left alone, no longer a contributor but just a liability. Yet God says that Israel should no longer consider herself to be a widow. Her "Maker" is her "husband."

Who is this one who has "married" her, delivering her from the disgrace? Verse 5 rings with his titles. Not only is he the Creator, he is also the One who has all the host of heaven at his command ("Yahweh of heaven's armies; NIV, "LORD Almighty"). He is Israel's "Holy One," whose holy nature is not turned to judgment (as in much of chs. 1–39) but to redemption ("Redeemer"). Nor is his creative, redemptive power limited to some locale or to some group. He is the "God of all the earth." *This* is the One who has taken you as his own! Who could be sad?

But there was an even worse disgrace than childlessness or widowhood: divorce. At least in widowhood your husband had left you alone involuntarily. The divorced woman was one who had been found wanting in some way and was willfully "rejected" (54:6). This was Israel: She had failed God and was cast out of her home. But God has found a way and brought her back to himself. His "anger" was for a "moment," but his "compassion" is "everlasting" (54:7–8). In the work of the Servant the righteous anger (the justice) of God is satisfied so that his "unfailing love" (54:10) can find expression for those who will receive it.

Restoration and Hope for a Ruined City (54:11–17)

THE IMAGE NOW changes from disgraced woman to a ruined city. The people are like a city that has been "lashed by storms" (54:11), subjected to "tyranny" and "terror" (54:14), and has experienced "havoc" (54:16) within it. But since God is the One who brought all that to pass (54:16), he is the One who can change it all (54:15, 17).²

Again, the promises are lyrical in tone. In place of weathered, broken walls stained with smoke, there are "battlements of rubies" glittering in the sun. In place of tyranny and terror, there is true learning, "peace" (šalom), "righteousness," and security. These blessings are for those who gladly accept the role of "servants of the LORD." How can sinful, rebellious Israel enter into such a role? Through the ministry of the Servant of the Lord. Through his self-giving, all the promises made to his servants in chapters 40–48 can be realized.³

Bridging Contexts

AN OLD MAN lies in a hospital bed. The story of his life is written in the deep furrows on his face, his heavily veined nose, and his bloodshot eyes. But deeper than those more superficial evidences lies the flat, bleak look in those eyes. He has tasted life to the full, and the taste has been bitter. Now he waits for the end, wondering if what lies beyond will be even more bitter. To the side of his bed comes a woman. Life has not been very kind to her either. Her dress is not in the latest fashion, nor is her hair dressed in a becoming way. Her complexion is sallow, and attempts to improve it with make-up have not been entirely successful. But here the similarity between the two figures ends, for out of her eyes shine eagerness, humor, hope, and love. "Hello, Dad," she says with a smile.

He turns his head slightly to look at her and then turns away. "I know what you want to say to me, and you might as well save your breath. It's too late." Too late for forgiveness from God, too late for a new start, too late to change the past.

"But Dad, it's never too late! Look what Christ has done for me! I was in the gutter, drinking myself to death, just as you said I would. But he saw something in me to love! Everybody else said I was no good, and he told them to 'shut up."

"Daughter, you don't know what I've done. I was a preacher! Now I've done things I can't even talk about. If your God is so good and loving, he wouldn't have anything to do with me. I'm too far gone."

"Daddy, you look at me! Nobody is too far gone for Jesus Christ! He took every sin that was ever committed or ever will be committed on this earth. If you think you're the worst sinner there ever was, you've got another think coming. He died for Hitler! Do you think you're worse than Hitler? No, you're just like Hitler, too proud to get down on your face and ask God to forgive you. He will forgive you, Daddy! He will! Just tell him you're sorry and ask him!"

The old man turned his head to look at his grown daughter. Touched by her intensity, he looked at her as he had not in a long time. And looking at her, he saw what was undeniably true—she was being transformed from the inside out. Suddenly, he was overcome with an almost unbearable longing. He was a wreck and his life was a wreck, and it was soon coming to an end. Was it possible that even at this late date some of that light on his daughter's face could be his? So, hesitantly, he reached his hand out from

under the sheet and took hers. In the next moments as he brokenly confessed his sins and his need and confessed a very tiny faith bolstered by his daughter's kiss, barrenness became fruitfulness, solitary disgrace became the welcoming embrace of the world's Maker, and rejection became joyous acceptance. When he opened his eyes, the broken walls of his life had become battlements of rubies.

Contemporary Significance

This passage shows us the heart of the gospel of Christ. God has reconciled his lost world to himself. He has not waited for us to find a way to bridge the gap between him and us, as he certainly could have in his own righteousness. After all, we are the ones who created the breach between him and ourselves, so let us find a way across it. But of course, there is no way from our side. For God to wait in the lonely isolation of his moral perfection for us to come to him would be to wait for all eternity. Our sinfulness makes it impossible to get ourselves to a place where we can stand before his blazing purity and survive. "The soul who sins will die" (Ezek. 18:4).

Yet the amazing thing about God is that he gets no satisfaction from the richly deserved death of the sinner (Ezek. 18:32; 33:11). Some of the family members of the victims of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh were disappointed when they were prevented from seeing him die. They wanted that satisfaction. Not so with God. Not even the death of the most heinous criminal brings a grim smile of satisfaction to the face of God. Rather, there is grief in his heart like the grief of a David who cried, "O Absalom, my son," over the death of his rebel son, who would have killed his father without a qualm.

So what did God do as an expression of his "unfailing love," his "everlasting kindness," his "covenant of peace"? What did he do so that the "barren woman" could be surrounded with laughing children, the "widow" could be married to the most wonderful husband in the world, and the "rejected" divorce could know that the rejection was only for a moment while the acceptance was forever? What he did was to take all that proud emptiness, all that solitary self-sufficiency, all that demand for our own way, into himself.

This is the true face of God—not the stern, implacable Judge dispassionately rehearsing the endless list of our crimes and in the end grimly meting out exactly what we have deserved. No, this "Maker," this "God of all the earth," is our Father, who will go to any lengths to see that we do *not* get what we deserve. The judgment has been taken by the Judge, who can now proclaim that there is no more judgment outstanding against the accused.

Thus, from God's perspective, he will never pronounce judgment again (Isa. 54:9). From his perspective, "no weapon forged against" his people will ever succeed again (54:17). That is, no further punishment or discipline is necessary because it has all been taken by God himself.

But that is from God's side. Suppose we do not continually avail ourselves of his provision of grace and mercy. Suppose we decide to use that grace so that we can persist in a life of sin. This would be like God's saying to us as he finishes cleaning out the garbage dump where we have been living and turning it into a lush vegetable garden, "You will never be sick and hungry again." That is true from God's perspective. But it assumes that we will continue to live in the middle of that garden. If we decide to move over to the next garbage dump and still try to claim those promises, we will discover that while the effects of that move are also covered in what God did for us in his self-giving, they will continue if we choose to live outside his grace.

There is nothing more God needs to do for his "covenant of peace" to be ours forever. "The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (53:5). We are "accepted in the beloved." But there is something we must do to experience that covenant forever: We must continually choose to live under its terms.

Isaiah 55:1-13

¹"COME, ALL YOU who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. ²Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. ³Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with my faithful love promised to David. ⁴See, I have made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander of the peoples. ⁵Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations that do not know you will hasten to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with

⁶Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near.

⁷Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts.

splendor."

Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

8"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD.

9"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

10As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,

11 so is my word that goes out from my mouth:

It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

12You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.

¹³Instead of the thornbush will grow the pine tree, and instead of briers the myrtle will grow.

This will be for the LORD's renown, for an everlasting sign,

which will not be destroyed."

Original Meaning

WE TURN NOW from the announcement in chapter 54 that all is forgiven to the invitation to experience that forgiveness. The tone is one of earnest appeal with no less than twelve imperative or jussive verbs occurring in the first seven verses. Everything has been done, the tables are set, all is in readiness. How tragic it would be if those who are invited fail to come. Once again, we sense the great significance of what was prophesied in chapter 53. Something is revealed there that has changed the tone of all that follows. The bride *is* restored, the city *is* rebuilt. What a tragedy if those for whom all this has been done fail to enter into it. They *must* come.

In 55:1–5 the invitation is expressed in the strongest terms to those who have no resources in themselves. It begins in physical imagery ("come to the waters," "come, buy and eat," vv. 1–2) and moves onto a more spiritual plane ("that your soul may live," v. 3). God's invitation is not merely to find a supply of bodily needs but to satisfy a person's whole being (*nepeš*; NIV "soul") with true life. Once again, as in 54:10, the language of "everlasting covenant" is used. The old covenant was broken and thus legally annulled after the allotted punishment had been meted out. But God promises another covenant, this one on the pattern of the unconditional one given to "David" (55:3).

But more is going on than simply a similarity between the covenants. It is plain that in some sense this "everlasting covenant" *is* the covenant with David. For what David was in part, "a witness to the peoples" (55:4), the nation now will be able to bring to fulfillment (see also 43:8–13). The nations of the world will flock to restored Israel because of their God (55:5).

This is, of course, exactly what was predicted in Isaiah 2. This everlasting covenant, evidently made possible by what was described in chapter 53, will mean that God's people really will be enabled to fulfill the servanthood promised to them at the beginning of the book. But they must accept what God has done for them. A banquet table is worse than useless to the person who is either too proud or too ashamed to come and eat from it.

Verses 6–11 address the universal problem of people who hear the invitation of God with clarity. They cannot deny the reality of the choice before them: to stay where they are in unbelief or to go forward in immense uncertainty. Surely for people in Isaiah's own day, but no less so for those who read these words in the Exile, the message of what is now 52:13–53:12 was largely a mystery. What in the world was God talking about? Who is this person, and how in the world can what he did make it possible for God to be *eternally* reconciled to his people?

God's challenge to these people is to exercise faith first and let understanding come afterward. God promises that what he says (his "word," 55:11) is indeed reliable and that forgiveness and abundance are theirs now and in the future, if they will only seek him sincerely and unreservedly. Once again, the issue is not deliverance from physical captivity but deliverance from alienation from God—the real problem. If the "wicked" will turn from their "way" and "thoughts" (55:7) to God's "ways" and "thoughts" (55:8–9), even if those "ways" and "thoughts" are not perfectly intelligible to them, they will be pardoned and restored.

All of this is brought to a close in 55:12–13. While much more than deliverance from physical captivity is being talked about, that imagery would communicate most immediately in the circumstances of the Exile. All nature will rejoice in the redemption of humanity (cf. 42:10; 44:23; 49:13), and in place of sorrow and sighing there will be "joy" and "peace" (cf. 35:10; 51:11) as the captives return to their God.

Bridging Contexts

JESUS USES THIS same intensity of invitation in his parable of the king's banquet (Luke 14:23). When those who were first invited to the banquet refused to come, the king told his servants to go out "to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full." God has made all the preparations, and he *will* find people to respond to his invitation. As Paul says, not many of these will be mighty or wise or noble, as the world defines those (1 Cor. 1:26–29). The mighty, the wise, and the noble demand that God's ways and thoughts be made intelligible to them first. But the lowly, the helpless, and the broken don't have to have things explained to them; they simply see the open door and the loaded tables.

An illustration of both the gravity and the intensity of this invitation can be illustrated by a time of tragedy, such as a flood. A mother, a son, and a daughter are clinging to the upper branches of a large tree surrounded by raging flood waters. The rescue team in a boat cannot get right up to the tree because of debris, but the distance between the boat and the tree can be jumped with effort. The team in the boat shout with urgency, "Jump, jump," but the family members are afraid. Finally, summoning up courage, the son jumps and lands safely in the boat. Then the daughter jumps. She falls into the water, but the rescuers are ready and quickly pull her into the boat. Now the rescuers along with the son and daughter plead with the mother, "Jump, jump, you can do it! We'll catch you if you fall short." There is a compelling urgency in the invitation. But she is afraid, and as she debates whether to jump or remain in the apparent safety of the tree, there is a terrible crack, the tree falls, and she is swept away with it. "Seek the LORD while he may be found."

Contemporary Significance

TRUST AND SURRENDER. From Abraham to the present the nature of faith has remained the same. We ask ourselves why God called Abraham to start journeying without knowing his precise destination (Gen. 12:1). It is because of the human problem. We want to decide what is right and wrong for ourselves. Nothing has changed since the Garden of Eden. We do not wish to be told by our Creator that something is wrong for us when everything appears so delightful. Neither do we wish to be told that something is good for us when it looks as though it is going to take a lot of effort and may actually bring us some pain. We want to hold the place of God in our lives and have God serve us, supplying our needs as we dictate. So faith always involves letting go of secure footholds and (apparent) certainties to do things God's way.

This is what Zerubbabel was assured of in Zechariah 4:6: "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty." And this was what Peter grasped for a moment as he stepped over the side of the boat onto the surface of the heaving waves (Matt. 14:29). As long as we first insist that everything about God's ways and plans be made completely intelligible to us before we decide to act on his invitation, we will never act.

If, however, we will surrender our right to decide what is best for us and allow God to determine that, we are on our way home. We have turned that most critical corner—the corner of surrender. Now we are allowing God to be the Creator and to dictate to us the terms under which we were made to operate. So God's invitation comes to all of us, not merely those who have never entered a relationship with him.

To be sure, it comes to us as he desperately pleads with us to jump from that apparently secure tree of pride and self-sufficiency into his arms. It is a plea to jump from appearance to reality. The life outside of God is only apparently secure and abundant. It really has none of that to offer in the end. To remain in its hold is to choose loss and poverty. It is to live in defiance of the Holy One who made us. That way cannot possibly lead in any other direction but final loss. So God calls us to jump out of what is only an appearance into what is a reality. Come from hunger to food, from thirst to water, from sadness to joy, from death to life. The person debating whether to jump says, "But I already have food, and water, and joy, and life." The fruits of faith are only apparent after you have jumped. Then, looking back, you can say, "Oh my, what I thought I had was only an illusion."

But the invitation is also for those who have been living the life of faith for many years. One of the problems of living on earth is that the longer we live here, the more its ways become our ways. A child has no difficulty in believing in the unseen world; it is only adults who tend to "pooh-pooh" it. In the same way, a child has no difficulty in believing that God can do the impossible. It is only adults who feel they have to temper "childish enthusiasm."

I am not speaking here about our increasingly pagan "mind over matter" philosophy with its suggestions that we can find ways to manipulate the spirit world to make it serve our purposes. That is the door to death. Rather, I am saying that it is at God's urgent invitation that we are to leave our comfortable worldly ways and launch out in paths of service and living that do not depend on our strength but on his. When he speaks, his word will bear the fruit he intends in wonderful ways in our lives.

Isaiah 56:1-8

THIS IS WHAT the LORD says:

"Maintain justice
and do what is right,
for my salvation is close at hand
and my righteousness will soon be
revealed.

2Blessed is the man who does this,
the man who holds it fast,
who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating
it,
and keeps his hand from doing any
evil."

³Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the LORD say,
 "The LORD will surely exclude me from his people."
 And let not any eunuch complain,
 "I am only a dry tree."

⁴For this is what the LORD says:

"To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant—

5to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters;

I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off.

6And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD

to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant— ⁷these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations." ⁸The Sovereign LORD declares he who gathers the exiles of Israel: "I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered."

Original Meaning

ON THE SURFACE, it might seem as if the book should have ended with chapter 55. What more could remain after those stirring promises that God's grace is freely available to all who accept the urgent invitation? Isaiah 55:12–13 with its benedictory tone sounds like the climax of all that can be said about the divine-human relationship.

Yet the book is far from over. In our chapter arrangement no less than eleven chapters remain. Bernard Duhm, the late nineteenth-century commentator, felt the division between chapters 40–55 and 56–66 so strongly that he proposed that there was yet a third editor/author of the book, whom he designated "Trito-Isaiah."

However, it is not necessary to go to such lengths to understand what is taking place in this segment and in the book as a whole. A careful reader will note an apparent contradiction between the teachings of chapters 1–39 and those of chapters 40–55. This seeming contradiction may be illustrated by the differing uses of the word "righteousness." In chapters 1–39 it is used exclusively for behavior that is in keeping with the statutes of God.

But in chapters 40–55, except for two places, the term refers to God's "righteousness" in faithfully delivering his people in spite of their previous sin. In other words, if the book ended at chapter 55, the reader might well assume that since righteousness is basically impossible for humans, we are delivered into a "position" of righteousness by God's grace through his Servant and that the stress on righteous living in the first part of the book is not incumbent on those living in grace.

In a remarkable way, chapters 56–66 synthesize the teaching of the two earlier sections, showing that actual righteous living is a requirement for the servants of God (i.e., chs. 1–39) but that such righteousness is only possible through the grace of God (i.e., chs. 40–55). Thus, far from being an unfortunate and miscellaneous appendix to "the real book," these chapters form the necessary conclusion and climax to the book's teaching. As such, they show us the expected characteristics of the life of servants of the Lord.²

I must touch on a second matter concerning the structure of this segment of the book. A number of recent commentators have proposed a chiastic or concentric structure, in which chapters 60–62 form the centerpiece.³ I believe this is correct. The function of a chiasm is to give the midpoint special prominence. Thus, we find the culmination of the servants' and the Servant's ministry in focus in chapters 60–62 as restored Jerusalem fulfills the promised ministry of being a light to the nations.

But why not put this material at the end of the book (note the promise of the new heaven and the new earth in ch. 65)? I believe that this is directly in line with a common feature in the book. Isaiah is unwilling to end any segment in the book with the kind of promise that will leave readers with the feeling that their present behavior is unimportant because of the certainty of future promises of blessing. So, although "Jerusalem, the light of the world," is highlighted in the center of the literary structure, the final words of the book have to do with the necessity of obeying God if we are to be among that worshiping crowd from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

The chiastic structure looks like this:

A. Obedient foreigners (56:1–8)

B. Necessity of ethical righteousness (56:9–59:15a)

C. Divine warrior (59:15b–21)

D. Jerusalem, light of the world (60:1–62:12) C' Divine warrior (63:1–6) B' Necessity of ethical righteousness (63:7–66:17) A' Obedient foreigners (66:18–24)

It is important to observe that B' is not merely a mirror image of B. There are important advances in the thought there even though the general topic is the same (see the book outline at the conclusion of the introduction).

Verse 1 provides an immediate illustration of the synthesizing function mentioned above. It calls on the reader to "maintain justice and do what is right" in language similar to that found repeatedly in chapters 1–39. But in the same breath it says we should do this because God's "righteousness"—that is, his "salvation"—is at hand. We can only do righteousness because of God's righteousness made available to us.

A superficial reading of chapters 40–55 may have led us to believe that since we are unable to do right and since God has delivered us from the effects of that failure by a righteous act of grace, right living is not really incumbent on us except as a kind of unrealistic ideal. No, says Isaiah, righteous living, as expressed in Sabbath-keeping and the rejection of "evil" (56:2), is the absolutely necessary expression of God's righteous salvation.

That thought is reinforced in dramatic, even shocking, ways by the following verses. It may have been easy for persons reading chapters 40–55 to conclude that it was really one's birthright that secured salvation. Why had the Israelites been delivered from captivity? Certainly it was not because they deserved it, nor is there any demand in those chapters for changed living. The people were delivered from captivity for one reason alone: God had made some promises to their ancestor Abraham. "Thus," someone might say, "it really doesn't matter how I live; I simply need to accept the privileges of my birthright and not give up hope in God."

But verses 3–8 radically refute such an idea. The person who is pleasing to God is not the purebred Israelite who is doing his part to continue the physical line of Abraham. If the "foreigner," who is not part of that line, and the "eunuch," who cannot pass that line on, choose to live in obedience to God's "covenant" (vv. 4, 6), they are more pleasing to God than the Israelite

who lives in rebellion against that covenant. God will give the eunuch a better heritage than children, "an everlasting name" (v. 5).

But this righteousness is more than legalistic law-keeping. Verse 6 speaks in relational terms of binding oneself to God as an act of love, service, and worship. Those who do this will be brought into God's "house of prayer," there to participate in the worship of that place, because God's purpose is to gather "all nations" to himself (vv. 7–8).

By beginning the final section of the book on this rather shocking note, the prophet is both tying us back to the beginning of the book, reminding us that the redeemed servants of the Lord have a mission, to draw all the world to the "holy mountain" (56:7; cf. 2:2–3), but also telling us that being a member of the covenant community is not a matter of inheritance but of obedience.

Bridging Contexts

THE STRUGGLES OF the early Christian church illustrate the problem addressed here. In the intertestamental period, the Jewish community had veered directly from one ditch into the other. In the century after the return from exile, there was a tendency to maintain no distinction between themselves and the surrounding pagan nations (see Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi). Instead of being a light to the nations, drawing them to the God of Israel, the Israelites were being sucked into the generalized, syncretistic paganism of the nations. Under the ministry of the priest (Ezra), the governor (Nehemiah), and the prophet (Malachi), the community finally recognized its peril and began to restrict the influence of the surrounding peoples. But having escaped the ditch of syncretism, they plunged straight across the road into the ditch of isolationism. Judaism cut itself off from the surrounding world, making a fetish of its purity before God.

As a result, it took severe upheavals within the church before the early Christians could accept the truth that Isaiah is teaching here. Peter had to have a vision from heaven to convince him that it was even appropriate to share the gospel with non-Jews (Acts 10:9–16). Even then, when conflict arose over association with Gentiles, Paul had to confront Peter publicly to keep him from reverting to the old ways (Gal. 2:11–14). The fact that the Gentiles accepted the work of the Jewish Messiah, Jesus, and bound

themselves in obedient love to the God of the covenant did not really enter into the picture. They did not have the birthright. Fortunately, the ancient truth prevailed, and it became clear, especially through the ministry of Paul (Eph. 3:4–13), that it was a part of God's eternal plan to "gather still others" (Isa. 56:8).

Little has changed today. A Christian worship service is beginning, and two young men come in who are clearly out of place. Their clothes are outlandish and not very clean. Their hair is lank and long. Their arms are covered with tattoos. They are clearly not of the evangelical subculture. Are they earnestly seeking salvation? Are they believers who have left all to follow Christ? Who knows? Who cares? They don't belong because they are different from us. So an usher, perhaps tactfully or perhaps rudely, goes up to them and tells them that they are not welcome here. They don't have the right family credentials, so they don't belong. And God may well say to us the same thing he said to the returned Israelites, "Don't you dare exclude them from my house. They love me more than you do, as you could tell from their lives if you took the time to look. That loving obedience is the only family credentials that matter to me."

Contemporary Significance

THERE IS A CLEAR message to the evangelical wing of Christendom in this passage—and indeed, in this entire section of Isaiah. There is a real danger of our falling into this same error. We ask ourselves who are the elect of God. Obviously, it is those who have "believed on the Lord Jesus Christ." They are the children of God, his servants; they have been adopted into his family; they have the birthright. There is a positive side to this, for in the nonevangelical church one often senses a lack of assurance about a relationship to God. If a person is asked, "Are you going to heaven," he or she responds, "Well, I hope so. I am doing my best." And of course, "doing my best" is not what Christianity is all about. As the elder John says, it is about having Jesus Christ (1 John 5:12). So the assurance that comes from knowing that you personally have exercised faith in God through Christ and that God keeps his word to deliver such a person from the condemnation of his or her sins is a good thing.

But there is a "down side" to this understanding of the faith, namely, the conviction of many people that since they have *once* exercised faith in Christ and have not actively repudiated that confession, therefore they *are* saved regardless of how they live from day to day.

This conviction is fostered by a reading of Romans 7 in isolation from Romans 6 and 8, which results in a direct contradiction of the point Paul is attempting to make. Paul is saying that we as Christians *must not* continue to live lives of sin (6:15–18) and that we need not so continue because we have the Spirit of Christ in us. Through the Holy Spirit we can "put to death" the deeds of our sinful nature (8:13). Yet influential Christian preachers and teachers tell us that Romans 7, which speaks of the bondage to sin experienced by those who, like the Jews, attempt to defeat sin in their own strength, depicts the normal Christian life. This implies that being Christian is really only a matter of birthright, of adoption, and has no real impact on how we live. It may change our ideals, but it does not change the realities. Thus, we see the spectacle in North America of persons claiming to be "born-again" Christians whose ethical lives are no different from those of a lost world.

That is the very opposite of the truth. Unless our adoption into a new family changes our behavior into the likeness of the Head of that family, there is reason to doubt the reality of the adoption. The German pastor and professor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, killed by the Nazis because of his involvement in a plan to assassinate Hitler, spoke to this issue in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*. He spoke of a "cheap grace" that promises an eternity of bliss with no cost to us now and no expectations of a changed life. God says to us as he says to the returned Israelites, "It is not the proof of your pedigree that counts; it is your life of glad obedience to me that demonstrates your real pedigree."

Christians today must recover the understanding that while it is indeed by grace through faith, not our works, that we are saved (Eph. 2:8–9), it is *for* good works that we have been saved (Eph. 2:10). Our righteousness earns us no favor at all with God, but that righteousness is the proof positive that we have been transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light (Col. 1:12–13). There really is no other evidence.

Isaiah 56:9-57:13

⁹COME, ALL YOU beasts of the field, come and devour, all you beasts of the forest! ¹⁰Israel's watchmen are blind, they all lack knowledge; they are all mute dogs, they cannot bark; they lie around and dream, they love to sleep. ¹¹They are dogs with mighty appetites; they never have enough. They are shepherds who lack understanding; they all turn to their own way, each seeks his own gain. 12"Come," each one cries, "let me get wine! Let us drink our fill of beer! And tomorrow will be like today,

57:1The righteous perish,
and no one ponders it in his heart;
devout men are taken away,
and no one understands
that the righteous are taken away
to be spared from evil.

2Those who walk uprightly
enter into peace;
they find rest as they lie in death.

or even far better."

3"But you—come here, you sons of a sorceress, you offspring of adulterers and prostitutes! ⁴Whom are you mocking?
At whom do you sneer
and stick out your tongue?
Are you not a brood of rebels,

the offspring of liars?

5 You burn with lust among the

⁵You burn with lust among the oaks and under every spreading tree; you sacrifice your children in the ravines and under the overhanging crags.

⁶The idols among the smooth stones of the ravines are your portion; they, they are your lot.

Yes, to them you have poured out drink offerings and offered grain offerings.
In the light of these things, should I relent?

⁷You have made your bed on a high and lofty hill; there you went up to offer your sacrifices.

⁸Behind your doors and your doorposts you have put your pagan symbols. Forsaking me, you uncovered your bed, you climbed into it and opened it wide:

you made a pact with those whose beds you love,

and you looked on their nakedness.

⁹You went to Molech with olive oil and increased your perfumes.

You sent your ambassadors far away; you descended to the grave itself!

10 You were wearied by all your ways, but you would not say, 'It is hopeless.' You found renewal of your strength,

and so you did not faint.

11"Whom have you so dreaded and feared that you have been false to me, and have neither remembered me nor pondered this in your hearts? Is it not because I have long been silent that you do not fear me? ¹²I will expose your righteousness and your works. and they will not benefit you. ¹³When you cry out for help, let your collection of idols save you! The wind will carry all of them off, a mere breath will blow them away. But the man who makes me his refuge will inherit the land and possess my holy mountain."

Original Meaning

AFTER THE OPENING commendation of obedient, covenant-keeping foreigners and eunuchs in the previous section, this section resounds with a kind of judgmental language that has not been found in Isaiah since chapter 34. What is going on here?

Words of Judgment to the Leaders (56:9–57:2)

THIS SECTION BEGINS with an attack on "Israel's watchmen" (56:10), who are compared to "dogs" who do not bark because they are asleep with full stomachs (56:10–11). They are stupid "shepherds," who are only interested in taking care of themselves and have no concern for the flock. Clearly this is the leadership of the nation, and with what follows, they are evidently the religious leaders. The nation is in a desperate spiritual condition, and the leaders do not care. This is similar to what Amos said when he accused the elite of northern Israel of indulging their appetites with no awareness of the tragic condition of the house of Joseph (Amos 6:6).

Isaiah is implying that simply a return from captivity will not guarantee a new set of behaviors for the people unless there is a radical change in the attitude and behavior of the leaders from that which he has experienced in his own day (cf. Isa. 26–28). If the leaders continue to be self-centered and power hungry, the flock entrusted to them will continue to be overtaken by their spiritual enemies (56:9). Moreover, there will be so little spiritual perception that the disappearance of the "righteous" from among them will go unnoticed (57:1–2). The passing away of an older, more faithful generation will cause no alarm. The fact that they have been graciously delivered from the increasing chaos of a degenerate society will never occur to either the leaders or the followers in that degenerate society.

Words of Judgment to the People (57:3–13)

Now Isaiah Turns directly to the people, addressing them as "you." In strong language he speaks to those who believe that they are "the elect" and that cultic righteousness is all that is required of them. He accuses them of really being idolaters at heart. Like those who worship rocks and trees (57:5–7), who engage in ritual prostitution (57:8), and who sacrifice their children (57:5, 9), their only real desire is to manipulate divine power to their own advantage. They mock those who are passionate about obeying God's austere covenant (57:3–4) and prefer their own lush, amorphous syncretisms.² After all, they are the elect; they are free.

Of course, the attempt to manipulate divine power to one's own advantage is hard work (57:10). One has to learn a lot of arcane religiosity and put up with a good deal that is boring and repetitious. But in the end, the worshipers tell themselves, it will be worth it, and so they gather up what energies they can find from within themselves and soldier on.

Following the description of the people's behavior, God pronounces his judgment. He begins with a question: "Whom have you so dreaded and feared that you have been false to me?" (57:11). This is the God who graciously delivered them from captivity in Egypt, who kept them through all the years of apostasy, and who now in the end has delivered them once again, this time from Babylon. How could they not have "remembered" (57:11) all this and have so easily turned aside to the religions of their own making?

In an ironic aside, he asks whether it is because he has not spoken to them that they do not fear him. Of course, he has spoken to them again and again. No, the answer to these two questions lies in the depravity of the human heart. God has revealed all they need to know, and there is no other god who has terrified them into abandoning what they know. It is simply that God asks too much. He asks them to give up control of their lives and to abandon themselves into his hands in glad obedience (57:13b). That is too much. So they would rather construct a religion that seems to give them control over their destinies, that seems to let them decide what is right and wrong for them and to provide a means of avoiding that wrong and producing that right. But such a religion is worthless in the end.³ It cannot stand up when the winds of adversity blow upon a life. It will collapse and blow away (57:13a).

Bridging Contexts

BEING AN IDOLATER IN SPIRIT. Too often we restrict our understanding of idolatry to worship involving imagery. Since we do not use images in our worship, either public or private, we think none of this talk about pagan religion has any relevance to us. It is obvious, of course, that "idols" are a part of "idolatry." But there is an attitude that leads to the worship of images that is separable from the images themselves. We get a clue to what this is when Paul refers to "greed" as "idolatry" in Colossians 3:5 and Ephesians 5:5.

What does the apostle mean here? He means that there is an attitude behind covetousness that says if I can just have all the things I want and I see, I will be happy. If some is good, more is better. There is also an attitude about reality evident here. What I really need is connected to material, physical things. The worship of images then springs from this attitude. If I can just figure out how to manipulate the physical world so as to guarantee physical abundance for myself, I will have solved the riddle of life.

With such an attitude, it is possible to be an orthodox Christian and yet to be an idolater in spirit. I can believe all the right things mentally and still be trying to use my religion to achieve my goals, to serve my ends, to supply my needs. The pronoun in the last three phrases of the previous sentence is significant: "my." Thus, prayer and devotion, worship and service, all

become devices to serve my ends, and my Christianity is actually only another form of paganism: the attempt to manipulate the divine for my ends. The result is that the religion will become more and more formal and more and more lifeless—as Paul says, "having a form of godliness but denying its power" (2 Tim. 3:5).

This condition is especially deadly in leadership (cf. Isa. 56:9–12). When the leaders are motivated by what they can get out of their positions, whether it be remuneration or adulation, they will have no real concern for the spiritual life of the flock. In fact, the flock will begin to emulate the leaders, often unconsciously. They will absorb the attitudes and approaches of the leaders and come at life in the same ways. As a result, they are decimated by the world, and the leaders are not even aware of what is happening.

Contemporary Significance

PASTORAL LEADERSHIP. There are at least three areas in which this passage relates to contemporary life. The first is the area of pastoral leadership. Some say that pastors are no more prone to moral failure today than they have ever been. It is only that in this day of instant communication, more of us are aware of it than people were in the past. The knowledge of a moral tragedy could be hidden from all but a few then; it cannot now. Wherever we come out in that discussion, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and other works like it certainly show us that moral failure among pastors is not something that has only emerged in the late twentieth century. But the question is what to do about it, and this passage offers some helpful guidelines.

These leaders are characterized by an obsessive interest in themselves and their own gratification. They love to sleep; they love to eat; they love to drink; above all, they want their own way. These are people who, like King Saul, have never gotten themselves off their own hands. Unlike King David, they have never learned to forget themselves in the love of God and of others.⁴

If I as a pastor can be honest about my own inclinations to sin and, at the same time, will put my reputation, my achievements, my status, my success, and my rights on the altar of God both for all time and anew each

day, then the possibility of that kind of self-forgetfulness in glad service will be a real one. Then I as a pastor can know that neither I nor my people will be the ones to satisfy my needs. I must surrender my needs to God and can trust God to meet those needs. When the freedom of that self-forgetfulness is coupled with a sense of divinely given responsibility for the flock, there is a real possibility of the pastor's becoming a sterling example of loving faithfulness, even if that faithfulness leads to a cross.

The fine line between gluttony and asceticism. Not only have the leaders in Isaiah's day made the satisfaction of their desires primary, but so have the people. As I said above, to do so is to reduce one's religion to a form of paganism. I practice it to satisfy my desires. There is frightening evidence that this is so among us today. In so many ways the satisfaction of supposed needs is all-important to us: We drink to excess, we eat to excess, we cannot get enough sex of all sorts, we lie and cheat to get more money to buy more things to put into more storage facilities, and we sacrifice our children, both the unborn and the living, to the satisfaction of these needs.

What is the answer? For centuries the church has said that the answer is "the mortification of the flesh"—in other words, asceticism. That is, true saints are those who, in an impressive show of dedicated self-denial, refuse to satisfy their needs except to maintain the bare necessities of life. This is the all-or-nothing approach. The only way to secure victory for the spirit over the desires is to completely deny the desires.

But Paul tells us that in fact that kind of rigorous asceticism has no power to control the passions (Col. 2:23). So where is victory? It begins in the recognition that God made our desires and they are good. He takes joy in seeing that they are satisfied. The key is in self-surrender. Paul calls it "dying to oneself" (Rom. 6:11; Gal. 2:20; Col. 3:3–5). We surrender our needs to him, determined to be faithful to him and his ways above all else, leaving the fulfillment of our needs in his hand. Here there is freedom without excess, satisfaction without satiation, because we know that in the end it is God we want and that another half-gallon of ice cream will never satisfy that longing.

Syncretistic religion. In the Persian Empire at the time of the return from the Exile (ca. 538 B.C.), people had a heightened awareness of the rest of the world. Undoubtedly the careful organization of the empire and the increased communication involved had something to do with it. As a result,

there came an increased sense that all forms of religious expression and all religious conceptions were essentially the same. Unquestionably this was true for the pagan religions in the ancient Near East. The similarity of the basic worldview and the expressions of the worldview are startlingly similar from Sumer in the East in 2000 B.C. to Rome in the West in 2 B.C. So to represent Greek Zeus as Syrian Baal or Babylonian Marduk as Roman Jupiter or Phoenician Anat as Greek Athene was nothing more than might be expected.

But the problem arises with the religion of Yahweh, for that religion is startlingly different from all the rest at all the major points. Yahweh is *not* the same as Baal, and his worship is not the same as Marduk's. This is the truth for which the Judeans Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to the Babylonians) were willing to die. And it was this truth that the restored Judeans were apparently all too willing to surrender to the prevailing views in the Persian Empire and in the later Greek ones.

We are under similar pressure. Many today argue that all ways of thinking lead to God (assuming, incorrectly, that all religions are only human gropings after God) and that all expressions of God are at the same time partial and partially true. Thus, for the adherents of any one religion to insist that they know the only way to God is not only arrogant but positively sinful.

But suppose that what is true in the physical world is also true in the spiritual world, that is, that there are things that are absolutely so and things that are absolutely not so. Black is not white, and no amount of intellectual obfuscation will make it so. Neither will any amount of wishing make it so. Paganism refuses to believe this because if it were so, we would have to admit that we are not God and that we can neither find our way to him nor manipulate him to take care of us. Paganism must insist that we can find God on our own and that therefore my way is as good as yours because nothing spiritual is absolutely so.

Today, as in the days of the Persian Empire, we must stand on the uncomfortable facts. There is a God who is other than the created universe. Because this is so, human intellect cannot comprehend him. It can see the evidence for his existence, but that does not make him either intelligible or capable of manipulation by us. Thus, the only way we can know God is if

he reveals himself to us in ways that we can comprehend. He has done so in the life of the descendents of Abraham, originally physical and ultimately spiritual. That revelation has culminated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As there is only one Creator, so there is only one Savior. There is the truth, and there we must stand. Because the Judeans ultimately were willing to stand on what they knew at that time and because the first Christians were willing to stand on the further revelation that came in Christ, the Christian faith exists today. If either group had succumbed to the intense syncretistic pressures that existed in their day, there would be no Christian faith today. It is not one more of the world's great religions. It is either the only religion, or it is an incredible figment of fevered imaginations that does not deserve to exist.⁵

Isaiah 57:14-21

AND IT WILL be said:

"Build up, build up, prepare the road! Remove the obstacles out of the way of my people."

15For this is what the high and lofty One says—

he who lives forever, whose name is holy:

"I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit,

to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.

¹⁶I will not accuse forever, nor will I always be angry,

for then the spirit of man would grow faint before me—

the breath of man that I have created.

¹⁷I was enraged by his sinful greed; I punished him, and hid my face in anger,

yet he kept on in his willful ways.

¹⁸I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will guide him and restore comfort to him,

¹⁹creating praise on the lips of the mourners in Israel.

Peace, peace, to those far and near," says the LORD. "And I will heal them."

²⁰But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud.

²¹"There is no peace," says my God, "for the wicked."

Original Meaning

THESE VERSES STAND in sharp contrast to 56:9–57:13. There the stress was on the inability of humans to live the righteous lives that their redemption called them to live; here the focus is on the activity of God to "revive" (57:15) and "heal" (57:18–19) them. There the focus was on the failings of "you" (more than twenty-five occurrences of "you," "your," and "yours" in 57:3–13); here the focus is on what "I" will do (twelve occurrences of "I" and "my"). God will do for his people what they cannot do for themselves.

The stage was already set for this statement at the end of 57:13, where the prophet says that the one who takes "refuge" in God (instead of in idols) will inherit the land. While righteousness is expected of God's people, any attempt to produce it on their own will result in the most corrupt spiritual pride. The only hope is for God to deliver his people from sinning just as he delivered them from the consequences of sin when he restored them from captivity.

Once more the highway imagery comes to the fore. But this is not a highway for God (cf. 40:3–5), nor is it a highway for the people to return from captivity (cf. 11:16). Rather, this is a highway on which the "contrite" (57:15) can return to God, admitting their own inability to do what is right (cf. "the Way of Holiness," 35:8).

The third occurrence of the "high and lofty" pair is found in 57:15 (cf. 6:1; 52:13). In one of the most beautiful statements in Scripture, the One who is utterly separated from the inhabitants of earth in his "holy" place says that his dwelling is also with the lowly and the contrite. This is not to say that God will become less than transcendently holy; rather, he will bring humans to share that character. He has "created" humans, and he cannot bear to be in a position where he can do nothing but "accuse" them (57:16; cf. Hos. 11:10–13). Rather, his intention is not merely to punish (Isa. 57:17) but to go beyond that to giving his people a changed nature, where rebellion and pride will be replaced by "praise" and "peace."

Once again we see that the problem here is no longer captivity but the inability to live righteous lives. God does not merely promise forgiveness

for sin but a healing for those who "mourn" (57:19) over the state of Israel. Not only do they mourn for the absence of righteousness in the community, they mourn for its absence in their own lives (see 59:1–15a). In this way, they are in sharp contrast with the "wicked" (57:20–21). Because the wicked refuse to recognize their sinfulness and turn from it, they cannot experience the "peace" (*šalom*) that God promises. These final verses emphasize once again that God's promises are not for the nation as a whole merely because they are the descendants of Jacob, but specifically for those inside the nation—and outside—who recognize their need and turn to God in contrition.

Bridging Contexts

THIS PASSAGE SPEAKS of the sovereignty of God in human behavior. This is not to say there is some sort of deterministic element in it. But the question is, "How can human beings keep covenant with God?" Isaiah 56:1–8 established the priority of that requirement, praising the least expected who did that. But 56:9–57:13 made it plain that those who set out to produce their own righteousness would inevitably produce something spurious (57:12), whatever form that so-called righteousness may have taken.

Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:10–14) is an illustration of this fact. The Pharisee was proud of his own achievements, while the tax collector came to God acknowledging his failure and his need. What was the issue? It was one of pride and self-reliance versus reliance on God and seeking a dependent relation with him. If humans are to be healed of their sinful behavior, it must be God who does this, and he will do it for those who live in humble reliance on him. The language of "dwelling" in 57:15 is significant in this respect, reminding us of the language in John 15:5, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

Righteousness is not an end in itself. Whenever it becomes so, it merely becomes another idol, a device to earn the favor and blessing of the divine world. God does want righteousness, but only as a by-product of our relationship with him. He, "the high and lofty One," wants to live with and in us. In that way alone will we be able to live lives that reflect his character. So again, Isaiah 56–66 represents a resolution of the themes of

chapters 1–39 and 40–55. The first block of material tells us that righteousness is a necessity and that its absence brings judgment. The second block tells us that deliverance is a work of God's grace alone, requiring nothing but persistent trust that God will deliver. This section, then, reiterates the demand for righteousness but shows us that that righteousness is only possible by means of God's persistent grace.

Contemporary Significance

Today America is suffering from a failure of evangelical theology. The 1970s and 1980s were widely recognized as the age of the evangelical. The movement was large enough and influential enough to gain the attention of the national media; leading figures in the movement became forces to be reckoned with. Yet, concurrent with that popular recognition was the hastening moral decay of the nation. The connection between these two is not coincidental. To a generation that wanted to "feel good" at all costs, we declared a feel-good religion. All one has to do to gain a heaven of bliss and an earthly life of abundance is to say "yes" to Jesus' wonderful plan for life. This decision has no necessary bearing on a person's behavior.

While it is desirable to live like Jesus, it is also understood that this is not really possible. The transaction between God and believer is almost entirely legal. The "yes" to Jesus is all that is necessary to transfer a person from one jurisdiction to another, from one birthright to another. We expect to continue in sin—and not surprisingly, we do, with national polls showing that today the lives of evangelical Christians are indistinguishable from the world around us.² Our "righteousness" is just like the world's "righteousness."

This is much like the situation described in Isaiah 56–57. "Birthright" in itself means nothing. Just as God did not really care whether a person was a physical descendant of Jacob, neither does he really care whether we have made a profession of faith. What he wants to see is evidence of his behavior, his attitudes, and his passions being replicated in the lives of those who say they know him. This is true faith, as the book of James makes clear.

So we evangelicals need to come to God in contrition—contrition for spiritual pride, contrition for our arrogant dependence on accepting Christ

as a magical act, contrition for bringing reproach on the name of God, contrition for not allowing God to heal us, individually and collectively, of our persistent sinning, contrition for not believing that God can indeed impart his righteousness to us, contrition for our unwillingness to fully surrender to God, contrition that our "standing" before God has been more important to us than our relationship with him.

But the good news is that God is merciful. He wants to live with us and in us. He wants to heal us. The worst thing we can do is to return to the kind of legalistic righteousness of earlier generations. No, the message of these verses, and indeed of this entire last part of the book, is that while God expects real righteousness and justice in our lives, he also expects to do that in us and for us as a by-product of our loving relation with him. When it is he whom we want, then righteousness will be as natural to us as the grapes are on the branch. That righteousness, instead of having the stink of pride, will be a gentle fragrance because it will be all unconscious.

Isaiah 58:1-14

1"SHOUT IT ALOUD, do not hold back.
Raise your voice like a trumpet.
Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins.

²For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways,

as if they were a nation that does what is right

and has not forsaken the commands of its God.

They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them.

3'Why have we fasted,' they say,'and you have not seen it?Why have we humbled ourselves,

Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'

"Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers.

⁴Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists.

You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.

⁵Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself?

Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes?
Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

6"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke,

to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?

⁷Is it not to share your food with the hungry

and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—

when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

⁸Then your light will break forth like the dawn,

and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

⁹Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

"If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk.

10 and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.

¹¹The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sunscorched land and will strengthen your frame.
You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.

12 Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations;
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

13"If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words,
14then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob."
The mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Original Meaning

WE RETURN AGAIN to the inability of the people to do righteousness, as they were commanded in 56:1. Whereas in 56:9–57:13 their own attempts at righteousness were depicted as idolatrous, here those attempts are seen as being selfish and oppressive. Instead of their religion making them a blessing to those around them, as God intended, it made them a curse. Interestingly, the people were being caught up in what God had not particularly commanded—fasts¹—and were neglecting what he had specifically commanded—the Sabbath feast.

Verses 1–3 introduce the subject. The people give every appearance of piety and genuine concern to know God's will. But in fact, says Isaiah, they have "forsaken the commands" of God and are in a state of "rebellion." The evidence of this fact is in their approach to their cultic behavior. Why are they engaging in this behavior? Is it to express gratitude and submission to God? No, for as their quotation in verse 3 indicates, they are engaging in the behavior for the very same reasons the pagans do, to manipulate God to act in their favor.

Verses 4–12 expand on this theme. God *does* want to bless his people (58:8–9, 10b–12), but that blessing cannot be obtained by cultic manipulation. It is given freely to those who are in unbroken covenant relations with him. What evidence can the Israelites give that they are in such a relationship? Ethical behavior. Only twice in the Old Testament does God command persons to fast. But in hundreds of places he commands his people to treat other people, especially those weaker than they, with respect, justice, and kindness. So here God tells the people that if they want to stop doing something, they can stop oppressing the poor (58:6–7).

In fact, they fast for the very opposite reason of what God intends for his people. Instead of abandoning themselves and their needs into the hands of God and instead of giving themselves away to others, their religious activities have become self-serving. Verse 5 suggests this self-serving aspect with the phrase "a man to humble himself" (lit., "to afflict oneself"). The worshiper is merely doing something to himself to show how devoted he is. Verse 3 makes it even more explicit: "You do as you please." It is not surprising, then, that such religious behavior issues in oppression, violence, and hatred. Whenever human needs are exalted above everything else, the supply of those needs justifies any behavior at all.

God calls for behavior that is self-forgetful and outward-looking. Let acts of self-denial be for the sake of others and not for one's own sake. Work "to set the oppressed free" (58:6). Eat less in order to have food to give to the "hungry." Wear less-expensive clothes in order to clothe the "naked" (58:7, 10). This is the kind of cessation and self-affliction God has "chosen."

The reference to "light" in verses 8 and 10 looks both backward and forward. It looks back to the promises to the Servant in 42:6 and 49:6. By means of the Servant, God's light of justice will shine through his people to be a light for the nations. That theme is found as early in the book as 2:5

and continues through 30:26 and 51:4. The theme reaches its climax in 60:1–3, the passage to which this one looks forward. Through God's people the blessings of his covenant will be extended to the whole earth. Then the people who have walked in darkness will indeed see a "great light" (9:2).

Verses 13 and 14, speaking about the Sabbath, are connected to the preceding as a way of further saying what kind of cessation God *would* like. He would like his people to stop doing as they "please" on the Sabbath day (cf. 58:3). Again, the issue of going one's "own way" is central. Cult, even costly and self-denying cult, is attractive because it seems to offer a way to get God to do what we want. But ceasing work (for ourselves) and ceasing self-enhancing activities is not at all attractive. Nevertheless, the Sabbath is enjoined as one of the feast days and is to be considered as a time of delighting in the Lord and in all his blessings to us. It does not manipulate God but is a means of developing the all-important relationship with him.

Bridging Contexts

In Colossians 2:20–23, Paul says that one of the failings of rigorous self-discipline and careful attention to the forms of worship is that they cannot restrain the passions. No place is that more evident today than around the Church of the Holy Sepulcher during Passion Week. People have fasted all week, preparing themselves for the Easter celebrations. What happens? Processions from each of the branches of Christendom, all led by priests garbed in every kind of glittering and costly vestment, jostle with one another seeking pride of place. And quickly jostling and harsh comments descend into full-scale riots, with golden crucifers and shepherds' crooks being used as battle-axes. Is this the religion of Christ, who laid down his life for his enemies? Hardly! We can envision him standing again on the Mount of Olives, looking at the spectacle with tears streaming down his face.

But just as painful is another picture, one of a wealthy evangelical employer who gives liberally to missions but refuses to pay his employees anything above the minimum wage and refuses to contribute to retirement and health-care plans for them. Certainly the Lord does not want him to stop giving to missions, but doing that is no justification for mistreating people.

Contemporary Significance

THE ILLUSTRATIONS ABOVE demonstrate that the issue is the same for us today as it was 2,700 years ago. We are still just as tempted to use religious behavior as a way of manipulating God for our selfish ends as our Israelite forbears were. It is interesting that Isaiah uses fasting, because that continues to be a practice of Christians today who seek a more disciplined life. Other activities, however, have replaced Israelite cultic activities, such as church attendance, daily devotions, prayer, tithing, and so on, and these are all liable to the same dangers.

The danger is that we engage in them in order to wring blessings from a God who, we feel, is disinclined to give blessings unless we manipulate him in some way. Insofar as these attitudes, either consciously or unconsciously, govern our behavior, to that extent our religion is nothing more than idolatry. By contrast, to the extent that our religious life is characterized by self-forgetful service, freely given with no return expected, to that extent it is mirroring the life of God. And to those who are in the flow of God's life, blessing is a natural and abundant by-product. In this kind of behavior we show that we know God and are not in a relationship with him for what we can get, but for love.

However, it is important to remember the larger context of Isaiah here, for the point being made is the same as that found in the New Testament. We cannot live this kind of covenant life in our own strength. It is only as God empowers us with his grace that we are able to lay aside our self-serving attitudes and give ourselves away in love to God and others.

In this regard, there is cause for concern over the phenomenal popularity at present of the so-called "Prayer of Jabez" (1 Chron. 4:9–10). While there is no indication this is the intent of those who have popularized it, the idolatrous use of this prayer is a real danger. To repeat a set of words as though its mere repetition guarantees divine favor is the furthest thing from biblical faith. Yet one hears this use of the prayer touted in many quarters. People say things like, "I've said that prayer every day for a month, and my business has never been so good." Surely the idea is not to repeat Jabez's words but to emulate his attitude of committing himself to God. We do not find strength to deny ourselves and cultivate the life of the Holy Spirit by repeating words. We find such strength in abandoning ourselves to the sanctifying grace of God.

Isaiah 59:1–15a

¹Surely the ARM of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear.

²But your iniquities have separated you from your God;

your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.

³For your hands are stained with blood, your fingers with guilt.

Your lips have spoken lies, and your tongue mutters wicked things.

⁴No one calls for justice; no one pleads his case with integrity.

They rely on empty arguments and speak lies;

they conceive trouble and give birth to evil.

⁵They hatch the eggs of vipers and spin a spider's web.

Whoever eats their eggs will die, and when one is broken, an adder is hatched.

⁶Their cobwebs are useless for clothing; they cannot cover themselves with what they make.

Their deeds are evil deeds, and acts of violence are in their hands.

⁷Their feet rush into sin; they are swift to shed innocent blood.

Their thoughts are evil thoughts; ruin and destruction mark their ways.

⁸The way of peace they do not know; there is no justice in their paths.

They have turned them into crooked roads; no one who walks in them will know peace.

⁹So justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us. We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows.

¹⁰Like the blind we grope along the wall, feeling our way like men without eyes. At midday we stumble as if it were twilight; among the strong, we are like the dead.

We all growl like bears;we moan mournfully like doves.We look for justice, but find none;for deliverance, but it is far away.

12 For our offenses are many in your sight, and our sins testify against us.
Our offenses are ever with us, and we acknowledge our iniquities:
13 rebellion and treachery against the LORD, turning our backs on our God, fomenting oppression and revolt, uttering lies our hearts have conceived.

14So justice is driven back,
and righteousness stands at a distance;
truth has stumbled in the streets,
honesty cannot enter.
15Truth is nowhere to be found,

and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey.

Original Meaning

THIS PASSAGE IS one of the more poignant statements of human sinfulness and fallibility in the entire Bible. Interestingly, it begins with condemnation of others in the second-person plural (59:2–3), then moves to the third-person plural (59:4–8), but closes with confession in the first-person plural (59:9–15a). The prophet seems to understand that as true as the condemnation of others may be, in the end he cannot exclude himself from that condemnation. Like everyone else, he is not able to produce in his own strength the righteousness God requires.

Verses 1 and 2 seem to hark back to the opening of Isaiah 58. From their point of view, the people have done everything necessary to procure God's blessings for themselves. Yet it does not seem to be happening. What is the matter with God? Is he weak (his "arm too short")? Or is he inattentive ("his ear too dull")? Of course not! Their lack of blessing is not God's fault but theirs. Their "iniquities" and "sins" have come between them and God (59:2). And as chapters 57–58 have shown, some of those sins are their very religiosity.

Coupled with that are the twofold evidences of a broken social system: violence and injustice (59:3–4).² As has been said repeatedly above, one of the purposes of the covenant was to promote a society in which the ethics of the Creator were lived out in human relations. But Isaiah envisions a day, all too much like his own, when the religious forms of the covenant are adhered to with some rigor while its relational content is dismissed with hardly a glance.

The closing of 59:4 seems to provide the basis for yet one more of Isaiah's graphic illustrations. That verse ends with the suggestion that the evil in the restored community will not be a superficial matter but something that is endemic to them, something conceived and given birth to. And the things they give birth to, or produce, are like the "eggs of vipers" and the webs of spiders (59:5–6a). They are not only "useless" but worse, deadly.

This thought is further expanded upon in 59:6b–7. All the faculties of these persons are given over to evil: their "hands" to "acts of violence," "their feet" to the shedding of "innocent blood," and "their thoughts" to "evil." Thus, it is no surprise that the characteristic behavior of their lives,

"their ways," is ruinous and destructive. This thought is expanded on in 59:8. Taken with 59:7d, verse 8 gives us the catalog of the major words for "highway," "path," and "road" used so frequently throughout this book.³ In contrast to the highway of holiness that God will prepare for his people (35:8) or to the level highway on which he will come to deliver his people (40:3–4), these "roads" are "crooked," and those who embark on them will find destruction and disintegration, not the wholeness, the "peace" (*šalom*), that God offers (52:7; 57:19).

As noted above, in 59:9–15a the prophet moves from condemnation to shared confession, using first-person plurals. Here he is speaking for all the faithful of the land, people who by their very nearness to God realize their own propensities and their own need. Unquestionably the calling of a prophet was a spiritually dangerous one. It would have been easy, becoming so intimately allied with the holy God and being aware of just how terrible the sin of the people was, to consider oneself above such things. But if the prophet was closely allied with God, he was also still inextricably part of his human community. Tragically, any member of that community, if left to himself or herself, is capable of the worst sins imaginable. The mark of the truly great prophets was that they did not forget the latter in their absorption in the former.

This confession is one of a person who has reflected deeply on the human condition. This is not a little regret over a few "unfortunate slip-ups." Rather, it is a recognition of the profound incapacity of humans to produce the very conditions on which "justice" and "righteousness," the things God called for in 56:1, depend. Not only is no "justice" to be found (59:9, 11, 14), neither are "truth" (59:14–15) and "honesty" (59:14). The condition is one of complete "darkness" (59:9), into which "light" cannot penetrate. The reason for this is that the prophet confesses that "we" do not have the moral "eyes" (59:10) to see the light.⁴

In 59:12, in words reminiscent of Psalm 51:4, the prophet makes it plain that the reason injustice and unrighteousness are such serious sins is not that they are first of all crimes against humanity but sins against the Creator who made us. They are acts of "rebellion" against the Lord of the universe. *That* is why they are terrible sins. If there were no Creator to whom we are responsible, no one can logically say that the strong snatching resources for survival from the weak is a bad thing. In fact, evolutionary theory would

suggest that this is a necessity if "higher forms of life" are to emerge. But Isaiah will not have it, for what we do to one another are heinous crimes against God. Having revolted against God and thereby denying the "truth" of our existence, there is no truth in any of our relationships to the extent that those who take a stand against "evil" become the target to be attacked.

Thus, the prophet paints a picture that seems truly hopeless. If this is the condition of the people of God even after they have returned from exile, what hope is there? God continues to call for righteousness and justice as fruit of their restoration, but they are utterly incapable of doing those things. We may say that it is a realistic picture, born of the most searching reflection on the human condition. But that offers no comfort. Are humans doomed to continue in sin, recognizing that they ought to do differently but are constitutionally unable to do so? Isaiah is definitely not saying that. Rather, he is showing the need for something other than merely stern discipline and good intentions if God's commands are to be fulfilled. What that something is will be uncovered in the next segment.

Bridging Contexts

REVIVALS. One of the facts of history is that when revival comes to a people, it never starts among those furthest from God. Typically, it starts among those closest to him. Thus, the well-known revival text, 2 Chronicles 7:14, begins with the words, "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray." The revival does not come from among those who are not God's people but those who are and who gladly name themselves as such.

The revival that broke out at Asbury College in Wilmore, Kentucky, in February 1970, which some credit as being formative in the emergence of the so-called "Jesus Movement" of the 1970s, began with a group of students meeting for prayer for more than a year, asking God to visit the campus. There had been a difficult presidential transition, and there was a good deal of bitterness and animosity in the college and in the small town where the college was located. But God began to answer those prayers when one of those praying students, certainly one of the "best" in the student body, had an opportunity to speak in chapel and began to confess his own need for God.

That confession was the match that lit the fire, a fire that continued on the campus for several weeks and touched tens of thousands as "witness teams" of students scattered across the country to share what God was doing. And while their message did call for "you" to change and for "them" to stop sinful ways, it did not focus there. Rather, the focus was on "our" need and the faithfulness of God to meet that need.

Contemporary Significance

WHENCE OUR INHUMANITY TO OTHERS? This passage is one of the most candid expressions of the human condition to be found in a brief compass anywhere in human literature. It lays bare one of the realities of human existence that philosophers struggle to explain: Why do we do things that are so obviously destructive of even our own best interests in the long run? Why do we choose to do things to one another that are not merely self-serving but egregiously vicious and cruel? Whence comes our fascination with the violent and horrible?

Many who do not wish to admit that the problem could be systemic have put forward environmental explanations. Two recent ones are Karl Marx's suggestions that the problem is one of economics and John Dewey's claim that the problem is one of ignorance. Both of these have been proven to be false during the twentieth century. The promise of communism that when the means of production are put into the hands of the workers and when the petty bourgeoisie are forcibly removed from the scene, all evil and all coercion disappear has turned out to be one of the cruelest jokes ever perpetrated on humanity. One of the facts that has been lost on us in the blizzard of horrors in World War II is that communism was responsible for the deaths of upwards of thirty million people in the 1930s. No, the problem is not economics.

Nor is the problem ignorance. Was there ever a more educated populace than that of Germany in the 1930s? Yet it was the Germans who embraced Hitler enthusiastically, and it was the Germans who swallowed Goebbels's propaganda, blinding themselves to the evident evils of the system these men were foisting on them. Nor did the wonderful educational system of the United States save us from the terrible tragedy of Vietnam. In fact, it may be argued that one of the main things the burgeoning education of the

twentieth century made possible was the construction of more terrible tools to be employed in the service of evil.

In fact, as the Bible insists, the problem of evil is systemic, although not in the way that many world thinkers have maintained. These thinkers have believed that "Good" and "Evil" are eternal entities in the universe. They are a given in existence, and it is out of their constant conflict that the visible world has emerged. Humans cannot be relieved of this conflict except perhaps, as in Buddhism and Hinduism, by gaining release from the very wheel of existence.

Over against this, the Bible offers another picture. Creation preceded evil. God is light, and in him is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5). He created the universe as an expression of his own goodness (Gen. 1:4; etc.). But he has permitted his creatures the possibility of choosing not to live within his purposes, and that choice on the part of our first parents was like introducing a virus into the body. It has infected the entire system, most especially the human system, and it manifests itself in the corruption of one of the central features of humanity, our capacity to image. Genesis 6:5 says that the very way we form the images in our hearts (the place where intellect, feelings, and will combine for the Hebrews) has become intensively and extensively corrupted. Thus, just as cancer cells are able to capture the cells around them and turn them to their own destructive purposes, the Bible insists that there is a moral cancer let loose in the human system. This is the picture Isaiah is painting for his readers.

Honesty compels us to admit the correctness of that picture in our own societies and in our own lives. None of us can pretend that in ourselves we are above the common human experience. If we pretend that we can somehow achieve the righteousness of God in our own strength, we are both deluded and deceitful—deluded because we have blinded ourselves to the facts and deceitful because in the deepest recesses of our souls we know the facts but won't face them. We are like the Pharisee who "prayed to himself" (NIV margin) and said, "I thank you that I am not like other men" (Luke 18:11).

If there is a cure for the disease, it does not lie in ourselves any more than the cure for cancer lies within the cancer victim. Our hope is the same as that of the tax collector in the parable just mentioned. It lies outside of us in the "mercy" (Luke 18:13) of our Maker, in the possibility that he can

somehow solve the problem we cannot. He must make it possible for us to pay the high price of justice, for justice is costly. To give the other person his or her due without taking advantage of them presupposes a kind of inner security in which the one giving justice does not need to worry about being taken advantage of in turn.⁵ This is freedom. But is that kind of freedom truly possible in view of the depth of the human problem? That is the question Isaiah's realism poses for us today.

Isaiah 59:15b-21

15bTHE LORD LOOKED and was displeased that there was no justice.

¹⁶He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene;

so his own arm worked salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him.

¹⁷He put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head;

he put on the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak.

¹⁸According to what they have done, so will he repay

wrath to his enemies and retribution to his foes; he will repay the islands their due.

¹⁹From the west, men will fear the name of the LORD.

and from the rising of the sun, they will revere his glory.

For he will come like a pent-up flood that the breath of the LORD drives along.

20"The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins,"

declares the LORD.

²¹"As for me, this is my covenant with them," says the LORD. "My Spirit, who is on you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will not depart from your mouth, or from the mouths of your children, or from the mouths of their descendants from this time on and forever," says the LORD.

Original Meaning

THIS PASSAGE CONCLUDES not only 59:1–15a but also the block of material beginning at 56:1. The people were commanded to do righteousness and keep justice (56:1), and the fact that the eunuch or the foreigner who did these things would be considered a full member of the community (56:3–8) emphasized the importance of the command. But apart from 57:14–21, where God promised to heal the contrite, the material from 56:9 to 59:15a narrates a sad account that climaxes in the tragic statement of 59:9–15a. The burden of that account is that God's people seem unable to keep his commandments. In some cases they try to keep them in false ways. But in the end they admit that even with the best will, they cannot do either what God has commanded or what they agreed to when they accepted the covenant with him.

So what is to be done? The answer is found in 59:15b–21. God will come and do for his people what neither they nor anyone else can do for them. That is, the same "arm" (59:16) that made it possible for them to be restored to fellowship with God (53:1), the Servant, will now defeat the sin that reigns in them and will make it possible for them to be, in truth, the servants of the Lord (as promised in 2:1–5 and elsewhere throughout the book). Whereas in 52:13–53:12 the Servant was submissive, undergoing the punishment the erring sheep had brought on themselves, now the arm of the Lord is revealed as a conquering warrior (59:17).

The "enemies" he will defeat are not outside oppressors, as both the literary and the historical context make clear. Rather, it is the sinners in Israel who will be conquered. But we notice that he is not doing this on behalf of the righteous in Israel. Instead, he is doing it for those "who repent of their sins" (Isa. 59:20). Thus, what he is really defeating is sin itself as it reigns in his people. He is not coming here to vindicate the

righteous (59:1–15a made it abundantly clear there are no such persons). No, he has come to do what the people, sinners and righteous alike, cannot do, namely, defeat the power of evil in their lives. Moreover, this victory has a worldwide impact. People all over the world ("from the west and from the rising of the sun") will be affected by the witness of a righteous Israel (cf. Ezek. 36:21–27). They will give God "glory" and turn to him in obedience ("fear the name of the LORD," Isa. 59:19).³

Verse 21 concludes all that has been said in chapters 56–59. God's goal for his people is for them to be witnesses to the world of his nature and character, that he, the only God, is indeed the only Savior. But that witness has been silenced by the unclean lips of the nation, just as the unclean lips of the prophet had rendered him speechless (6:5). The goal of the divine warrior is not merely so that the people can enjoy the holy life of God. The goal is that the "Spirit" of God can fill the lives and mouths of his people, making the witness promised in 2:1–5 not just a possibility but a reality. This is the fulfillment of the "covenant of peace" (54:10; 55:3–5).

Bridging Contexts

THE REV. PAUL BLACKHAM of All Souls Church in London delivered an address on "Mission in a Post-Modern World" at Amsterdam 2000. One of the significant points he made in that address is that logic and argument are greatly devalued in the postmodern mind-set. They are approached with an almost infinite skepticism. Human experience, however, is treated with near reverence. Thus, the quality of the life of a witness is given much more credibility than the quality of his or her argument. Blackham went on to say that this is good news for the Christian evangelist, because the entire biblical approach to witness and mission revolves around the testimony of the witness's life. Thus, the cry of Isaiah for transformed lives that demonstrate the redeeming power of God continues to be echoed and underscored in the twenty-first century. Words about transformation are useless if they are contradicted by lives that are not transformed.

Contemporary Significance

THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH desperately needs to recapture not merely the truth but the experience pointed to in these verses. We have come to believe that Romans 7 (and Isaiah 59:1–15a) is all we can expect. God has forgiven us of our sins (delivered us from our Babylon), but he is helpless to deliver us from our sinning. "God forbid" (to quote the KJV of Rom. 6:2)!

To be sure, if we merely rely on discipline and will to enable us to conform to God's expectations, we will be left in Romans 7, which is precisely Paul's point. He says in Romans 6 that we must defeat sin, and in Romans 7 he shows us why the Jews, he being one of them, had been unable to do so. The law simply could not provide the dynamic necessary to overcome entrenched self-centeredness. But that is all lead-in to Romans 8. Sin, as a way of behaving and relating, *can* be defeated in our lives because of what God has done for us in the divine warrior, Christ. He has done what the law could not do, deliver us from sinning.⁴

He does this through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is widely recognized that the Spirit is the dominant figure in Romans 8, occurring seventeen times in Romans 8:1–16. Here the promise of Isaiah 59:21 is explained in detail. Christ will live his life within us through the Holy Spirit, and we will be enabled to live a quality of life like that described in Colossians 3:12–16:

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

Such a life is not possible for those who are only forgiven. But unless it can be made possible, it is merely one more hopeless burden believers are

required to carry. We are commanded to do something we cannot. What Isaiah and Paul are saying is that Christ came to make it a possibility through the gift of the Holy Spirit. We can keep covenant with God, with no credit for the feat accruing to us at all but all glory to the conquering Christ. He enables us to live "blameless" lives (1 Thess. 5:23), to walk in a "blameless" manner (Gen. 17:1), and to keep us in that walk until the coming of Christ.⁵

Isaiah 60:1-22

¹"ARISE, SHINE, FOR your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.

²See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you.
 ³Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

4"Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the arm.

⁵Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy;

the wealth on the seas will be brought to you,

to you the riches of the nations will come.

⁶Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.

⁷All Kedar's flocks will be gathered to you, the rams of Nebaioth will serve you; they will be accepted as offerings on my altar, and I will adorn my glorious temple. 8"Who are these that fly along like clouds, like doves to their nests?
9Surely the islands look to me; in the lead are the ships of Tarshish, bringing your sons from afar, with their silver and gold, to the honor of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor.

10"Foreigners will rebuild your walls, and their kings will serve you.
Though in anger I struck you, in favor I will show you compassion.
11Your gates will always stand open, they will never be shut, day or night, so that men may bring you the wealth of the nations—their kings led in triumphal procession.

¹²For the nation or kingdom that will not serve you will perish; it will be utterly ruined.

13"The glory of Lebanon will come to you, the pine, the fir and the cypress together, to adorn the place of my sanctuary;

and I will glorify the place of my feet.

14The sons of your oppressors will come bowing before you;

all who despise you will bow down at your feet

and will call you the City of the LORD, Zion of the Holy One of Israel. 15"Although you have been forsaken and hated,

with no one traveling through,

I will make you the everlasting pride and the joy of all generations.

¹⁶You will drink the milk of nations and be nursed at royal breasts.

Then you will know that I, the LORD, am your Savior,

your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.

¹⁷Instead of bronze I will bring you gold, and silver in place of iron.

Instead of wood I will bring you bronze, and iron in place of stones.

I will make peace your governor and righteousness your ruler.

¹⁸No longer will violence be heard in your land,

nor ruin or destruction within your borders,

but you will call your walls Salvation and your gates Praise.

¹⁹The sun will no more be your light by day,

nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you,

for the LORD will be your everlasting light,

and your God will be your glory.

²⁰Your sun will never set again, and your moon will wane no more;

the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your days of sorrow will end.

²¹Then will all your people be righteous and they will possess the land forever.

They are the shoot I have planted, the work of my hands, for the display of my splendor.

22 The least of you will become a thousand, the smallest a mighty nation.

I am the LORD; in its time I will do this swiftly."

Original Meaning

Isaiah 60–62 form the center section of the chiastic structure in which chapters 56–66 are arranged (see the comments at 56:1–8). These three chapters display the glorious future of a Jerusalem in which God's glory shines through his anointed Servant (61:1–3). That glory is an expression of the reality that will exist when the divine warrior's conquest of sin is complete. But even prior to that final consummation, many aspects of it have already been realized. God's light has dawned in Zion in the person of Jesus Christ; as a result, many of the world's great nations have come to Jerusalem. In the process many of the dispersed peoples of Israel have been restored to the land. From Jerusalem a witness has gone out to all the world, and that witness continues to this day.

Chapter 60 may be divided into four stanzas. (1) Verses 1–3 form a vividly poetic introduction. (2) Verses 4–9 focus on the return of Zion's dispersed sons and daughters, accompanied by the wealth of the world. (3) In verses 10–14 the kings of the oppressor nations submit to Zion. (4) Verses 15–22 demonstrate how God will not cast off Israel forever but will fully restore it to himself.

Poetic Introduction (60:1–3)

THE EMPHASIS ON "light" in this section is all the more striking because of the contrast with 59:9. Where there was complete "darkness," there will now be "light" like that of the rising sun. There is no question as to the source of this light. It is not something that originates from within Zion; rather, it is a reflection of the "glory of the LORD." Something has occurred that makes it possible for the glory of the Lord to be seen in his people. That something is the conquest of sin by the divine warrior. As 42:6

and 49:6 said, the Servant will be a "light for the Gentiles [nations]," and Zion will be the lamp out of which that light shines on the nations (60:3).

The purpose of God's sharing his glory with his people becomes explicit in 60:2–3. Israel has a mission: The "nations" are in "darkness" because they do not know the one Creator, who is thereby the one Savior. When the light of God dawns in Israel, the nations will recognize it for what it is and "come" flowing to it. Zion's light is not for itself but for others.

Return of Zion's Dispersed Sons and Daughters (60:4–9)

THE FINAL THEME of the introduction is expanded in two ways: Isaiah 60:4–9 stresses that the nations will bring wealth with them to Jerusalem; in 60:10–16 the emphasis is on the submission that these nations, who once oppressed Israel, will offer. Both stanzas contain references to the fact that the nations will restore Zion's scattered children.

In 60:4–9 Isaiah emphasizes the worldwide nature of the pilgrimage of the nations, coming from the far southeast ("Sheba") and from the distant west ("Tarshish"). They will come with every kind of conveyance, from camels to ships. The wealth will be of every sort as well: incense, flocks, rams, silver, and gold. But there is no question what this wealth is intended to honor, for it is "proclaiming the praise of the LORD" (60:6), it is "to the honor of the LORD your God" (60:9). It is neither to praise nor to honor Zion, for Zion is only the lamp from which the light shines. To be sure, if it were not for the lamp, there would be no vehicle out of which the light could shine, because God has chosen to reveal himself in the context of human life. So the "splendor" with which he endows his people is an expression of his own generous abundance, but even more it is so that the world may know him.

Along with their wealth, the nations will also bring back Zion's "sons" and "daughters" (60:4, 9). This figure of speech pictures Zion as a bereaved wife and mother. What she thought was gone forever God will restore. He is able to make his people productive and fruitful again in every area of their lives. Note also the restoration to Israel of her scattered people. If the promises to Abraham are to have any meaning, the forced dispersion of Abraham's descendants cannot be permitted. In a coming day, all those who wished to return will be able to do so; moreover, the nations that carried them off will be the ones to bring them home (60:4, 9).

Submission to Zion (60:10–14)

THE NATIONS WILL not only bring their wealth to Zion, but they will also come to serve her. The "kings will serve you" (60:10), and if not, their "kingdom will be utterly ruined" (60:12). This seems to stand in contradiction to such statements as 2:1–5; 56:1–8; and 66:20–23 (not to mention 60:6, 9), which have the nations as equal participants in the worship of the Lord. Probably two points are being made. (1) As Isaiah has said throughout the book (e.g., 10:5–32), those who oppress God's people, even as an instrument in his hand, are accountable for their behavior. Thus, the day will come when there will be a complete reversal, in that the oppressors will become servants of a redeemed people. Sin will be punished.

(2) A choice is implied in the two kinds of passages. If one does not choose to become a participant in worship with God's redeemed people, the only other option is to become their servants. The option of continuing to be their oppressors will no longer exist. But notice again that the service is not finally given for the aggrandizement of Zion. Instead, it is given "to adorn the place of my sanctuary" (60:13; cf. 60:7). The service is given to Zion for the Lord, because she is "Zion of the Holy One of Israel." It is when God's people have truly laid aside their own self-seeking through the work of the divine warrior (59:15a–21; 63:1–6) and exist for God's glory alone that all these by-products come flowing to them.

Restoration of Israel to God (60:15-22)

A PROMINENT FEATURE of this final stanza is the recurrence of first-person pronouns referring to the Lord (60:15, 16, 17, 21, 22). Isaiah closes by asserting that all of the benefits that will accrue to God's people result from one thing alone: the gracious power of the Lord. Twice he asserts that "the LORD will be your everlasting light" (60:19, 20). It is he who will transform Zion from being "forsaken" and abandoned (60:15) to being suckled at the "breasts" of royalty (60:16). It is he who will replace silver, iron, and stones with gold, silver, and bronze (60:17). It is he who will take away violence, ruin, and destruction (60:18) and give peace and righteousness (60:17), salvation and praise (60:18) in their place.

Isaiah does not foresee a day when Israel will finally "get it all together" and bring in the kingdom of God. Rather, he sees a day when Israel will

finally allow God to do his work in them and through them. This is, of course, similar to the point that was made in Isaiah 9–11, where God demonstrated his trustworthiness in gracious deliverance. The recognition of 60:16 is identical in theme if not in words with that of Isaiah 12. When God is allowed to do his gracious transforming work in persons, then they "will know that I the LORD, am your Savior, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob."

But the ultimate transformation that the Savior produces is not changing bronze into gold or iron into silver. Rather, it is changing people who are helpless in sin, incapable of acting in righteous ways, into "righteous" people (60:21), people who are truly seen as the kind of "shoots" that the Lord has set out. These are the people who have in them a "brightness" (60:19) that outshines the sun or the moon. The Creator himself, the Holy One of Israel, shines out of their lives. What higher place in the order of reality can there be than to be "the work of my hands, for the display of my splendor" (60:21)? Thus, Israel will truly be a servant of the Lord.

Bridging Contexts

A THEOLOGICAL SETTING. Determining the historical setting the prophet has in mind for Isaiah 60–62 is not easy. If we are correct in thinking that chapters 56–66 are primarily addressed to people in the postexilic era, then he is not talking about the return from Babylon. That conclusion is confirmed when we compare chapters 56–66 with chapters 40–48. The problem addressed in this section is clearly not physical bondage. That fact also suggests that the prophet is not envisioning some other major return relatively soon after the first return. Once again, deliverance from a foreign country is not the major problem facing the people.

But did Isaiah have a specific event further in the future in mind? If so, we are hard-pressed to identify it. We must say that in contrast to his earlier predictions of exile in Babylon, release by Cyrus, and restoration to the Promised Land—all of which were specifically fulfilled—the predictions in Isaiah 60 have not been fulfilled. We can certainly say that the Messiah of 61:1–3 has come, proclaiming deliverance to the captives of sin, and that since his coming the wealth of the nations has certainly flowed to physical Jerusalem in praise of the glory of God in Christ. We can even say that

within the last 125 years what was previously unimaginable, the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, has occurred. But this is talking about events scattered over a period of two thousand years.

Even yet we cannot say that all of these predictions have been fulfilled in a final way. Nevertheless, if everything is focused on the final triumph of Christ at the end of time, it is surprising that some of these things have already occurred, at least in part. Perhaps the answer to all the questions is "yes." Perhaps no one historical setting is intended but rather a compilation of all the kinds of things that will take place to give final vindication to the faith of Israel.

In other words, the primary setting for these thoughts is not historical but theological. That is, the primary point is to say that it is only when God's grace is released in the lives of his servants that they can manifest his righteous character in such a way as to allow the nations of the world to see him and come to him as he desires. Precisely when and how these events are to occur is of secondary importance to this theological point. I am not suggesting that it is of no importance whether the events described here occur. But predicting what they are is not as important to the prophet as is getting God's point across.

Thus, the modern reader must ask if his or her spiritual context is like that which has been described in the chapters prior to chapter 60 or if it is like that described in chapter 60. The need for servants of God to be lamps through whom his life can shine undimmed has never been greater than it is at present.

Contemporary Significance

THE GLORY OF GOD IN US. Perhaps the primary place where the message of Isaiah 60 is made applicable to contemporary life is in the prayer of Jesus recorded in John 17. Here, in his so-called "high priestly prayer," the theme of "glory" appears repeatedly. At the heart of this repetition is the mutuality of the glory. Christ asks God to "glorify" him so that he in turn can "glorify" God (17:1, 5). This "glory" is something that has been freely shared among members of the Godhead since before time began (17:5), and Christ's work on earth has the function of bringing "glory" to God (17:4). But Jesus has also received "glory" through the lives of the disciples

(17:10), with whom he has shared the "glory" God had given to him (17:22, 24). In the end he wants his disciples to see the "glory" he shares with the Father.

It becomes more than a little mind-boggling to try to sort all of this into some kind of logical order. But I do not think that is the point. The point is simply to say in a variety of ways that "glory" is never for oneself. It is always to be shared, given away, reflected. In Hebrew, the word "glory" (kabod) does not have the ephemeral connotations that "glory" has in English. In fact, it is just the opposite. Kabod connotes what is weighty, significant, even real. This is what Christ has come to give us—the very reality of God. But just as he has given it to us from God, we are to give it back to him. As the light of his reality shines in us, it is not to draw people to us but to God. No accolades should come to us but to the God who shines through us.

What is the reality, the significance of God, that Christ came to share with us? It is his character. When the seraphim cried, "the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa. 6:3), they were not talking about an "aura" or a "halo." The meaning of the word "glory" is defined by the preceding sentence, in which God is described as the only truly holy being. Leviticus 18–25 leaves no doubt that "holy" for this divine being does not first of all designate separation but is ethical. So the "glory" of God that rises on his people and draws the nations to him is the solid reality of God's holy character. That character shines out of lamps that may not always have the most attractive appearance but which, if they are clean and spotless, will do nothing to obscure the shining of their light.

If we take away the lamp imagery, what is left for us today? Just this: There can be no question concerning the Lord Jesus' commission to us, namely, that we draw all nations to him, making them his disciples. How? Isaiah says that the nations will come to him, as he is seen "shining" in us. How does he shine in us? Isaiah 56–59 have made it clear: God "shines" through us when his ethical life is reproduced in us by his grace. When we lay down our pride in submission to him (57:15), when we put the good of others ahead of our own religious accomplishments (58:1–14), and when we live lives that embody his truth and justice (59:1–15a), then where there had been darkness, there will be light—a light that is not our own but reflects the glory that the Trinity shared before the beginning of time.

This latter point should be underlined. Just as the Christian enters into a relationship with God by his grace alone, so the Christian reflects God's glory to the world only by means of divine grace. Only as the life of God is graciously reproduced in us is it reproduced at all.

The heresy of Galatia is still with us—that is, the idea that while we enter this life by grace, we maintain it by effort, all the while knowing we are doomed to failure. That is not the case, as Paul so vigorously asserts (Gal. 3:1–5). It is the Holy Spirit who initiated us into the life, and it is the same Holy Spirit who enables us to live the life of God, not as a burdensome requirement but as a glad expression of his own nature set free within us (Gal. 5:16–26). This process will draw the nations not to us but to God. It is hard to improve on Motyer's way of saying this: "It is when the Lord in his holiness is present among his people, and manifestly so, that the world is magnetized."

Isaiah 61:1-11

¹THE SPIRIT OF the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the

²to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn,

³and provide for those who grieve in Zion—

to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness

instead of mourning,

prisoners,

and a garment of praise

instead of a spirit of despair.

They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.

⁴They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.

⁵Aliens will shepherd your flocks; foreigners will work your fields and vineyards.

⁶And you will be called priests of the LORD,

you will be named ministers of our God.

You will feed on the wealth of nations, and in their riches you will boast.

⁷Instead of their shame my people will receive a double portion, and instead of disgrace

they will rejoice in their inheritance; and so they will inherit a double portion in their land.

and everlasting joy will be theirs.

8"For I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity.

In my faithfulness I will reward them and make an everlasting covenant with them.

Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples.
 All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the LORD has blessed."

10 I delight greatly in the LORD;
my soul rejoices in my God.
For he has clothed me with garments of salvation
and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,
and as a bride adorns herself with her iewels.

¹¹For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow,

so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.

Original Meaning

IN THIS CHAPTER we are introduced once again to the means whereby God's people will be enabled to live righteous lives, which will in turn draw the nations to God. That means is the Anointed One, the Messiah (61:1–3a). Then follows a list of the benefits that the Messiah's people will receive (61:3b–7). In 61:8–9 God speaks, making it explicit that covenant righteousness is what he desires and that he is the One who makes that righteousness possible. Finally, the servant people break forth into a psalm of praise to God, who makes them a righteous people in the sight of the nations (61:10–11).

Scholars have long debated the identity of the person in 61:1–3. He has been identified with the Servant of chapters 40–55, with Trito-Isaiah, with some unknown disciple of Deutero-Isaiah who is leading the faithful during postexilic times, and with someone like Ezra.

Whybray argues against the first position because he says that there is no mention of the Servant's mission to the nations here. However, that is not strictly correct. To be sure, the Servant does not deal with the nations directly here, but he does have a mission to them. As God intervenes through the Servant in the lives of his people, they are freed from the bondage of sin and enabled to live in righteousness *before* the nations. When that happens, the Servant's mission to the nations will become possible (see 61:9, 11).

Of more significance than identifying the speaker is the calling given to him. He has been anointed by the Spirit of God, both to "preach good news" (61:1) and to provide "beauty" instead of "ashes," "gladness" instead of "mourning," "praise" instead of "despair" (61:3), so that God's people will be "oaks of righteousness." This is not the work of a human prophet; rather, it is the work of the Messiah, the Anointed (see the reference to the Spirit in 11:2), who is prophesied throughout the book.² He will make of his people what they cannot make of themselves.

The results of the Messiah's work are detailed in 61:3b–7, beginning with God's people becoming "oaks of righteousness." This is the opposite of what was said of them in 1:27–31, where they were an "oak with fading leaves" because of the unrighteousness and injustice practiced among them (1:21). But even there God promised that Jerusalem would one day "be called the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City" (1:26). Now he reveals the means whereby that will become a reality. The Servant/Messiah's work will not only deliver but also transform.

That deliverance and transformation is expressed in the language of rebuilding in 61:4 and in the language of freedom in 61:5. The nations will make it possible (61:5–6) for the people of Israel to fulfill their ancient calling, to be a royal priesthood (Ex. 19:6), serving God in the beauty of holiness. They will move from "disgrace" to the "inheritance" of a firstborn son—the "double portion" (Isa. 61:7).

The words of God in 61:8–9 underline again the central point in this final section of the book. Why will the people of God enjoy the inheritance of the firstborn son? Because (NIV "for") "I, the LORD, loves justice." What is the logic there? Is it merely that oppression of the Israelites by the nations is unjust and God is not going to permit it to continue indefinitely? "Robbery and iniquity" suggests that is not the case. Rather, it is that God loves justice and hates robbery and iniquity in his people, and one of the effects of the "everlasting covenant" (61:8) he will make with them is that they will be able to live the life of God's true children. "All who see them" (61:9) will recognize this fact.

As has happened before when the work of the Servant/Messiah is presented, the response is a paean of praise.³ Israel sees herself as a bride whom the Groom has dressed in beautiful wedding garments. What are the garments? They are "salvation" and "righteousness" (61:10). The figure changes in 61:11. Now Israel sees herself as a fruitful field in which God has planted the seeds of flowers, namely, "righteousness" and "praise." In the overall context of Isaiah 56–66, there can be no doubt of the import of these words. God will give his people the righteous behavior they have been unable to produce in themselves. He will do this for his own praise and glory before the nations as a witness to his almighty power.

THE WEDDING SYMBOLISM. The New Testament uses the same language as Isaiah does, the language of the wedding dress, to talk about the same issues. In his famous comparison of the church as the bride of Christ, Paul says that the church will appear before Christ "without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (Eph. 5:27). In Revelation 19:7–8 the same point is made: "For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear. (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)"

In two other places Paul uses the same language, although without specific allusion to the wedding dress. In 1 Thessalonians 3:13 he writes, "May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones." And he makes the point again at the end of the book: "May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at [or 'until'] the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:23).

With these images and statements the New Testament is saying what Isaiah says: that God wants us to share an intimate relation with himself in which he will do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, that is, to make us like himself, to make us behave as he does. In ancient times the week leading up to the consummation of the marriage was a time of celebration, with the men celebrating in one area and the women in another. On the day of the wedding, the bride was led to her groom's home dressed in a gown he had provided for her.⁴ There another round of feasting occurred before the bride and groom went to the wedding chamber.

The church is now in that week of celebration. God through his Son, Jesus, has sent to us a "garment of praise," a dress that will have all the onlookers uttering "oohs" and "ahs" as we walk through the streets to go to his house. Shall we go to the Groom clothed in the rags of our own failures to live a life where sin is defeated? Surely not! We can go to him clothed in a gown of the righteous behavior that he has enabled us to experience.

Contemporary Significance

RIGHT LIVING. The challenge for the contemporary church is to believe in Christ. On the surface that seems like a simplistic statement. Surely that is

what it is to be the church—to believe in Christ. Even the most liberal expressions of Christianity today admit that "belief" in Christ is basic. But that is just the question. What does it mean to "believe in Christ"? Does it merely mean to take him as our model (with varying descriptions of what that might be)? Many would say, "No, no, it means far more than that," namely, to have faith in Christ not only as our personal Savior from sin but also as the Savior of the world.

But what does it mean to be "saved from sin"? In too many circles today, it only means that the believer is delivered from the guilt and condemnation of his or her sin. The idea that Christ's life, death, and resurrection have as their ultimate goal the breaking of the power of continued sinning has become almost strange to modern Christian ears. Yet this passage makes it perfectly clear that that is the goal. The Messiah proclaims "the year of the LORD's favor" (Isa. 61:2) so that God's people may become "a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor" (61:3). What is his splendor but his character?

Can anyone seriously believe that a proud, boastful, self-serving, "bornagain Christian" is a display of God's splendor? If they do, they are denying the plain statements of the New Testament, where we read such things as these:

Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. (Titus 2:13–14)

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? (James 2:14)

For everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. (1 John 5:4)

Many modern Christians miss the significance of these latter two passages because they separate faith and works, or better, faith and Christian living. In other words, they believe we are brought into a relationship with God through Christ by faith. In this faith relationship we experience forgiveness of sins. Then, as an expression of our faith, we try to do "good works," believing that we are expected to but also knowing that, by and large, we will fail. This is a faulty understanding. In many different ways the New Testament tells us that faith in Christ is for the purpose of changing us into Christ's (and thus God's) likeness. Forgiveness of sin is not the end; it is only the means. The end is that we should live out the righteousness of God by faith. Failing to believe Christ to make our character like his, and attempting to do this merely as an expression of our faith and in our own strength, we cannot help but fail.

But some will say, "I have asked Christ to make me like him, and there have been some changes in my life, but I still fail to be all that I know he wants me to be." This brings me back to the opening statement in this section. We have asked, but have we believed? "Faith" is an act of complete trust in which we renounce all other supports. Have we truly surrendered our own way, our own desires, our own will into the hands of the Savior?

Most of us want God's power for holy living while retaining a firm grip on the steering wheel of our lives. We would like to be "better" Christians but are unwilling to become bond-slaves. God's awesome power to be loving when we are not loved, to be kind in the midst of cruelty, to be clean in the midst of filth, to be self-forgetful when everything around us says to "take care of yourself at all costs" is not available to those who would use it for their own ends.

A second factor is that too often we allow the accuser to defeat us. We do not see instant, painless change in our behavior and so we allow doubt to replace faith. But the point of failure is the point at which we must ask God to show us what in us is preventing his power from being released in us. As we give God the freedom to probe around in our persons and to excise what is killing us, we may enter into a painful process. But it is also a process that leads to wonderful freedom and joyous growth.

In the end, the only question is one of belief. Do we believe that Christ wants to deliver us from habitual sinning? Do we believe he can do that? Will we, personally and intentionally, believe him to do that in our lives?

Will we keep on believing him to remake us into his image, despite setbacks and difficulties, right to the end of the road?

Isaiah 62:1–12

FOR ZION'S SAKE I will not keep silent, for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet,

till her righteousness shines out like the dawn,

her salvation like a blazing torch.

²The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory;

you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow.

³You will be a crown of splendor in the LORD's hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your

God.

⁴No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate.

But you will be called Hephzibah, and your land Beulah;

for the LORD will take delight in you, and your land will be married.

⁵As a young man marries a maiden, so will your sons marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.

⁶I have posted watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem; they will never be silent day or night. You who call on the LORD, give yourselves no rest,

⁷and give him no rest till he establishes Jerusalem and makes her the praise of the earth.

⁸The LORD has sworn by his right hand and by his mighty arm: "Never again will I give your grain as food for your enemies, and never again will foreigners drink the new wine for which you have toiled; 9but those who harvest it will eat it and praise the LORD. and those who gather the grapes will drink it in the courts of my sanctuary." ¹⁰Pass through, pass through the gates! Prepare the way for the people. Build up, build up the highway! Remove the stones. Raise a banner for the nations.

11 The LORD has made proclamation to the ends of the earth:
"Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your Savior comes!
See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him."
12 They will be called the Holy People, the Redeemed of the LORD; and you will be called Sought After, the City No Longer Deserted.

Original Meaning

THE THEME INTRODUCED in 61:4–11 (and paralleling that of 60:1–22) continues here. It is introduced in 62:1 with a declaration of God's intent for Zion. The paralleling of "righteousness" and "salvation" is significant in two ways. (1) It reminds the reader that Israel's righteousness is only possible because of the saving activity of God; it is not something Israel can

produce on her own. (2) At the same time, the combination makes it plain that the only goal of God's saving activity is unmistakably righteous living.

This statement is followed by eight verses (62:2–9) of direct address to Israel. There has been much scholarly debate over who the speakers are. If God is the speaker in verses 1 and 6, then perhaps verses 2–5 and 7–9 are to be seen as prophetic amplifications on these themes. This blurring of the distinction between God and the prophet is a well-known characteristic of biblical prophecy. The theme of these verses, recalling the promises of chapters 49–52, is an insistence that God has not cast off Zion (62:4) but that he "rejoices" (62:5) over her as a groom does a bride (continuing the imagery of 61:10).²

In this statement of God's joy in his people, the idea of the display of his handiwork before the nations is never far from the surface. "The nations will see" the "glory" that is their "righteousness" (Isa. 62:2). The nation will be a beautiful "crown" in God's "hand" (62:3). Zion will be "the praise of the earth." One aspect of this is the idea of "recompense" (62:11): Just as Israel has been a butt of Gentile jokes, so they will become the object of Gentile praise and wonder. Some of that same idea is found in 62:8–9, where God assures his bride that the produce of the fields that once was taken by the "enemies" (cf. Deut. 28:33, 39) will no longer so be taken but will be eaten by those who planted it and so become a source of "praise" in the "sanctuary."

The concluding segment (Isa. 62:10–12) actually concludes the unit that began at 60:1. As already mentioned, these verses show some interesting parallels with chapter 40, with its call to "build up the highway" and "raise a banner for the nations." This is the same language used in the discussion of the messianic kingdom in chapter 11. Here Isaiah is drawing together strands from throughout his book in an effort to call the people to take action to receive the promises God is making to them. They *can* be the righteous people of God, his "Holy People" (62:12), who will draw all nations to him.

Now, as compared to 40:10, it is not the "Sovereign" who is coming but the "Savior" (62:11). The "ends of the earth" are to hear the Lord's "proclamation" that a Savior has come to Zion and to make their adjustment accordingly. They can come to the city that is now "Sought After," there to

share in its salvation, or they can continue to range themselves against it and be reduced to become its servants.

Bridging Contexts

IF ANY OF US has ever been in a situation where we felt completely abandoned and rejected and then, unaccountably, found ourselves welcomed and taken in, we can understand what this chapter is about. I had an experience like that in college. There was a girl in my class whom I admired from a long way off. She was pretty, she was witty, she was popular, she had it all. Whenever anything was going on, she was always in the middle of whatever it was. I was the opposite, or so I felt. I was not good-looking, my attempts to be funny usually fell flat, I tended to be loud-mouthed, and I was always on the fringes.

This girl and I happened to be in a speech course together. One of the assignments was for each of us to assess the personality of another class member, understanding that one of our assets (or liabilities) as a speaker was the personality we projected. On the day the assignments were due, we had to share them (privately) with the person we were assessing. When I saw that this girl was the one who had been assigned to assess me, I can hardly describe the terror I felt. I knew that she was going to fillet me like a fish. I knew that when she finished with me, I would be able to slither out under the door of the room without opening it. To my surprise yet today, she singled out trait after trait of mine that she found attractive and compelling. She handled areas that needed improvement with tact and insight. In fact, when I left the room, I could have floated out the window. She had found some things in me that were valuable. I have never forgotten that gift.

That is what God is doing here. Not for the first time in this book he is saying to all people that he sees worth and value in us. He wants to be with us, he likes us, we are important to him. To a great extent, this is so because of him and not because of us. Because God is the kind of person he is, he is able to see things in us that lie buried beneath layers of sin and shame. He is able to see possibilities where nothing but failure would be perceived by anyone else. But even more than that, he is able to uncover those hidden things, to let loose those possibilities, because he has taken all the failure, the sin, and the shame into himself. So he is able not only to show us what

is there but to set it free. He is able to give each of us on a cosmic and eternal level the kind of gift that girl gave me so many years ago in speech class.

Contemporary Significance

WE LIVE IN a time of strange paradoxes. One of those is that we have never had such emphasis on self-esteem coupled with such a high suicide rate. What explains this? I am not suggesting that our emphasis on self-esteem is causing the suicides, of course. But I would suggest that increasing our (artificial) attempts to induce self-esteem does not address the problem. What causes feelings of self-worth? What enables people to go on living when problems seem to mount above eye level? On the other hand, what diminishes our sense of worth? And beyond that, what does that have to do with Isaiah 62?

Paul Tournier, the Swiss psychologist, writes:

If we tried to cast off all our social apparel, we should tend to become individuals and not persons. The notion of the person is bound up with the human community, a spiritual solidarity, a common patrimony, and therefore to a certain conventional form of expression which partakes of the nature of the personage.⁴

What he was putting his finger on more than forty years ago is the fact that one's sense of oneself is in some sense a by-product of a whole web of relationships. We have not learned that lesson yet. Western society, especially North American society, continues to fragment. Families are now such complicated things, with step-step-mothers and siblings with whom we have no blood ties at all, that it becomes increasingly difficult to say I belong anywhere. I am an individual and not a person.

Oddly enough, self-esteem outside of a positive complex of relationships is not a good thing but a bad one. The serial killer often feels good about himself and has nothing but contempt for his victims. In other words, we are focusing on the wrong thing. We should be helping people to find complex, stable webs of relationship in which they play a vital and

necessary part. In such a setting they will know themselves to be of worth, but that worth will not be the most important thing to them. What will matter is that we find our "self" by giving it away to others.

This is, of course, what is at the heart of Trinitarian theology, which gave rise to the very concept of "person." The persons of the Trinity exist in mutually dependent relations with each other, and the identity of each is dependent on the others. There is no "Father" unless there is a "Son," and there is no "Son" without the "Father." And the "Spirit" is the "Spirit of the Father and the Son." That is why God is the kind of God he is. God reaches out to us with open arms, seeking to draw us in. We are his "crown," his "bride," his "My-delight-is-in-her," his "Holy People," his "No Longer Deserted." The Trinity want to take us into their society, where we find ourselves by surrendering ourselves into their love. John beautifully expresses this truth when he writes that his reason for telling what he knows about Jesus is so that his readers can have fellowship with each other—a fellowship that is shared with the Father and the Son (1 John 1:3). We give up our lonely individuality to find our true personality.

This is what the church, though broken and fallible, is all about. As we become a part of the people of God, we discover how valuable and important we are. When the church is the church, each of us playing our own part in the complex dance, we find ourselves. We do not have to be told that we have worth. We know it. Like the people of Israel contributing to the building of the tabernacle, we each, moved by the Spirit, have something to contribute (Ex. 35:20–29). Those who cannot sing can do the accounts, and those who cannot teach can organize fellowship meals. Each one has a vital part to fill (cf. 1 Cor. 12:4–11; Eph. 4:11–16). Those on the outside of such relationships look in with wonder and longing, just as God says the nations will look in upon his redeemed people.

Isaiah 63:1-6

WHO IS THIS coming from Edom, from Bozrah, with his garments stained crimson?
Who is this, robed in splendor, striding forward in the greatness of his strength?

"It is I, speaking in righteousness, mighty to save."

²Why are your garments red, like those of one treading the winepress?

3"I have trodden the winepress alone; from the nations no one was with me.
 I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath; their blood spattered my garments, and I stained all my clothing.
 4For the day of vengeance was in my heart, and the year of my redemption has come.

⁵I looked, but there was no one to help, I was appalled that no one gave support;

so my own arm worked salvation for me, and my own wrath sustained me.

⁶I trampled the nations in my anger; in my wrath I made them drunk and poured their blood on the ground."

Original Meaning

WE RETURN FROM talking about the future when the light will have dawned on a redeemed Israel, and through them on the whole world, to the less rosy present and what it will take if that light is to dawn. As I said in my opening comments on Isaiah 56–66, the material is arranged chiastically (see comments on 56:1–8). Chapters 56–59 speak of the inability of the people to do righteousness, but this is interspersed with, and finally concludes with, the promise that God will enable the righteousness he requires (59:15b–21). Chapters 63–66 return to this theme, but this time the promise of his intervention begins the segment, signaling that these two elements (human inability to do righteousness, divine ability to produce that righteousness) are reversed. Here the primary emphasis is on God's power to enable his servants to live righteous lives.

How can an unrighteous people manifest the light of God that will bring the nations to his feet? The answer is the divine warrior. God will defeat every enemy of his people, including the most dangerous of all, sin. Because of the physical and military imagery used in these verses, it might be easy to think that what is intended here is an announcement that God will defeat all the nations who oppress Israel in the future. That is certainly true, but it goes beyond that.

This is made clear by the succeeding context. Israel's problem is that they are weak because they are sinful. In response, God does not say in 63:1–66:24 that he will destroy their physical enemies in spite of their sinfulness. Rather, he will destroy the sinners *among his people* and will vindicate those among his people who allow him to make them righteous, using these latter people to call the nations to worship the righteous God. They are his true servants (65:13–16; cf. 54:17).

Thus, the blood that stains the garments of the Victor (63:1, 3) is the blood of sinners from all nations, including his own nation, who have defied him. This defiant character of humanity is symbolized by the nation of Edom (63:1; cf. 34:5–15; also Obad.). Why could no one else do this (Isa. 63:3, 5)? Because he alone did not have to die for his own sins (53:4–10). He alone is the righteous Judge, who is without sin. But this is not destruction for its own sake. Rather, it is for the purpose of making "redemption" and "salvation" (63:4–5) available. Until sin and those who propagate it are defeated, there is no genuine salvation available. The idea

that redemption and continued sin can coexist is not biblical; it is certainly not Isaianic.

Bridging Contexts

FOR MOST OF US, this picture of a blood-spattered warrior striding exultantly off a field of battle strewn with corpses is a distasteful one. This is especially true for us in North America, who have known so little bloodshed in comparison to the rest of the world. However, we need to put this in another perspective. Think about the prisoners in a Nazi concentration camp. Striding up to the barbed-wire gates comes a blood-spattered, smoke-begrimed GI, who with one burst of his submachine gun blasts the locks off the gates. Does he look distasteful to those prisoners? Not in the least! He is the most beautiful thing they have seen in years. He means freedom; he means deliverance; he means life from the dead. Can you imagine any of them saying, "Now Yank, those Nazis are really nice people, and if you had just talked to them gently and rationally, I am sure all of this unpleasant violence would have been unnecessary"? Hardly! On that field, there was only one approach, a fight to the death and winner take all.

The same is true in the spiritual world. There can be no negotiation with sin, for it is the sworn enemy of all that God is. It is sin that killed the Son of God, and it is sin that will kill all God's creatures if it can. The idea that we can have a negotiated peace where God holds one part of the creation while sin holds another is ludicrous. In the end, either the righteous God will rule the world or sin will. The same thing is true of the human heart. The thought that we can have forgiveness of sin by the blood of Jesus while continuing to practice that which killed him is ludicrous. Christ the warrior comes to destroy sin and set us free.

Contemporary Significance

As Christians, we look to the day when sin will be defeated on the earth. The Bible promises that Day in both Testaments. We do not know when the divine warrior will be manifested to complete that defeat, but we know that it will happen.

But that faith has implications for the present. It means that no quarter can be given to sin. Someone has said, "Republicans are death on sexual sins and any limitation of personal freedom but really don't care about inequity, while Democrats will fight to the death against inequity while jumping from bed to bed. But both of them are in favor of greed." To whatever extent that is true, it is a sad commentary. How can we make a place in our lives for what we are confident must be destroyed in the end if Christ is to reign? How can we act as if personal sin is laughable while structural sin is a terrible evil? How can we excoriate promiscuity while winking an eye at those who are gouging the poor? How can I excuse my sins while condemning yours? How can we act as if sin is anything but the sworn, deadly enemy of all we hold precious?

Harry Emerson Fosdick said it well, "Save us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore." If Christ is the divine warrior, who will eventually triumph over sin in the world at large, the time is now to let him defeat sin in our own lives and to give us a thoroughgoing hatred of it in all its forms. This is the underlying theme in each of Paul's letters: You have come to Christ, who has extended his grace to you; that means you cannot continue to live in sin. Stop stealing, stop lying, stop raging against each other, stop committing adultery, stop oppressing the poor, stop boasting. You can't keep that up and have the One who destroyed sin on the throne of your life.²

Isaiah 63:7-14

⁷I WILL TELL of the kindnesses of the LORD, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the LORD has done for us—

yes, the many good things he has done for the house of Israel, according to his compassion and many kindnesses.

⁸He said, "Surely they are my people, sons who will not be false to me"; and so he became their Savior.

⁹In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them.

In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

10 Yet they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit.So he turned and became their enemy and he himself fought against them.

11 Then his people recalled the days of old, the days of Moses and his people—where is he who brought them through the sea, with the shepherd of his flock?
Where is he who set his Holy Spirit among them,
12 who sent his glorious arm of power to be at Moses' right hand, who divided the waters before them, to gain for himself everlasting renown,

13who led them through the depths?
Like a horse in open country, they did not stumble;
14like cattle that go down to the plain, they were given rest by the Spirit of the LORD.
This is how you guided your people

This is how you guided your people to make for yourself a glorious name.

Original Meaning

AFTER INTRODUCING GOD'S ability to defeat sin in all of its forms, Isaiah returns to a discussion of the human inability to do what is right (from 63:7 to 65:16). But this iteration of the theme (in contrast to the way it is presented in chs. 57–59) has more of an emphasis on the recognition that human failure will always be the case unless God intervenes. So there is not only a lament over the failure but also the question why God allows this condition to persist.

The groundwork for this question is laid in 63:7–14, and then the question itself is brought out in 63:15–64:12. The forceful answer from God appears in 65:1–5. In 63:7–14 the prophet begins the discussion by rehearsing the theological significance of the Exodus. He lays the emphasis on the elements of God's character that were revealed in the Exodus events. His "kindnesses" and "compassion" (63:7) were revealed, as were his "love and mercy" (63:9). He is One who does "good things" (63:7) in saving and redeeming (63:9) his people.

But the Exodus events also reveal the rebellious character of God's people. After all God had done for them, the Israelites turned against him. Interestingly, Isaiah does not put this rebellion into either a legal or a royal context. That is, he does not say that they broke their covenant or they disobeyed their King. Rather, they "grieved [God's] Holy Spirit" (63:10). That is the language of personal relationship, for the "Holy Spirit" is God's personal presence among his people. Note too 63:14, where "the Spirit of the LORD" gave "rest" to the people (the language is reminiscent of Ps. 23). Clearly the "Spirit" here is a way of speaking about God's personal involvement with humans.³

This atmosphere is reinforced by such language as "lifted them up and carried them" (Isa. 63:9; cf. 46:3–4). All this makes the rebellion more unthinkable. It is not a king or a judge who has been disobeyed or whose authority has been denied. Rather, it is a Father's love, care, and concern that has been treated as worthless. The result is that their Lover became their "enemy" (63:10). Love and personal relationship do not invalidate the law of cause and effect.

But if the Exodus events illustrate both the undeserved grace of God and the shocking rebellion of the people, they also illustrate what older theologians called the "biddability" of God. For in spite of the rebellion of the first generation in the desert, God did not abandon his people. Although he would have been justified in wiping them off the face of the earth in response to their repeated breaking of the covenant, he did not do so. This is implicit in 63:11–14. Given God's initial grace and his continuing patience, what of the future? Can God provide a new Moses who will be the "arm of the LORD" (63:12; cf. 52:10; 53:1) for a fallen people? Can he not deliver them from their persistent rebellion and grieving of the Holy Spirit?

Bridging Contexts

THE THREE THEOLOGICAL themes of this segment of Isaiah are the perennial ones of church history. There is first of all the incredible, undeserved grace of God. Where better can this be seen than in the birth of the church? How could a group of people who were neither the intelligentsia nor the elite of their day have the kind of impact on the world that those first Christians did? It was only the result of the grace of God. Over and over again Paul marvels at that grace in permitting him to be the one to reveal the mystery of the ages to the Gentiles. And because the Holy Spirit was at work in those early believers, they did not merely revel in that grace but were able to become channels of it to a world that God had prepared to hear.

But the other theme is there as well. In many ways, just as the story of the Old Testament is a story of apostasy, so is the story of the church. We look at the medieval papacy with horror. How could the things that were done there be done in the name of Christ? Every one of the seven deadly sins was practiced right in the hierarchy of Christ's church. There is no grace that will make it so the evil in the human heart cannot be expressed.

But the third theme is there as well. Across the centuries, time after time, when a merely human interpretation would have said that the church had finally gone beyond the point of restoration, that very thing occurs. A Francis of Assisi appears, or a Bernard of Clairvaux, or a Martin Luther, or a Count von Zinzendorf, or a John Wesley. Alongside these, there have been millions of nameless people who have turned to God in failure, despair, and shame and found not merely restoration to favor but more than that, genuine cleansing and revitalization. In our rebellion, we have experienced God's incredible willingness to hear the prayer of desolation and come back home to our hearts once again.

Contemporary Significance

THE CHURCH IN the West today is in precipitous decline, and we need the message of these verses. While Christendom is still the established religion in most of the western European countries, it clearly has no hold on the hearts of the vast majority of the populace, who see Christianity as irrelevant to their lives. In North America the so-called "mainline churches" are in a state of near free fall, with millions departing their rolls annually, while their leaders speak piously of the "purging of the church." A recent book title speaks about life "after Christianity."

Isaiah calls us to return to our first love. It is not the stern Judge or the distant King who calls us but the One who has carried us through all the years (cf. 46:3–4). He is the One who gave us birth in the first place, who held our arms when we took our first steps, and who faithfully guided us out of the desert into green pastures. The whispers of the Holy Spirit are those of a brokenhearted Lover who tells us that it is not too late to return to his arms.

But this Lover is no weak-chinned stripling, who can be treated like a doormat, thankfully allowing us to use him over again whenever we are between other enchantments. He is Almighty God, whose ways are truth and whose law is eternal. To grieve his heart is to fall off a cliff. If he becomes our enemy, all of life will turn against us. Christians who have a sentimental idea of a God who exists for them are in for a rude shock, and it is time that we woke up to that reality.

But if we do wake up to it, there is no end to what God will do for us. He has breathed new life into his church before, and he will do it again. Contemporary writers, like the author of the Dune series of science-fiction novels, envision a future where a sort of hybrid religion exists because they have only known a church in decline. But that is not historically accurate, because history shows that God will not let his church go. The only question is when, and the answer to that question depends on us.

Isaiah 63:15-64:12

- ¹⁵LOOK DOWN FROM heaven and see from your lofty throne, holy and glorious.
- Where are your zeal and your might? Your tenderness and compassion are withheld from us.
- 16But you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us or Israel acknowledge us;
- you, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name.
- ¹⁷Why, O LORD, do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so we do not revere you?
- Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes that are your inheritance.
- ¹⁸For a little while your people possessed your holy place,
 - but now our enemies have trampled down your sanctuary.
- ¹⁹We are yours from of old; but you have not ruled over them, they have not been called by your name.
- 64:1 Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!
- ²As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil,

come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you!

³For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.

⁴Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived,

no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.

⁵You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways.

But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry.

How then can we be saved?

⁶All of us have become like one who is unclean,

and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;

we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.

⁷No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins.

⁸Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. ⁹Do not be angry beyond measure, O LORD; do not remember our sins forever.

Oh, look upon us, we pray,
for we are all your people.

10 Your sacred cities have become a desert;
even Zion is a desert, Jerusalem a
desolation.

11 Our holy and glorious temple, where our
fathers praised you,
has been burned with fire,
and all that we treasured lies in ruins.

12 After all this, O LORD, will you hold
yourself back?
Will you keep silent and punish us
beyond measure?

Original Meaning

IN THE PREVIOUS SECTION, we noted that 63:7–65:12 have, as an underlying theme, both a lament over human failure to do what is right and the question why God allows this condition to persist. The present section gives us the lament proper, which is addressed directly to God. We may divide these verses into four sections: 63:15–19; 64:1–5; 64:6–7; and 64:8–12.

The Complaint (63:15–19)

THESE VERSES, SPOKEN by the prophet as a representative of the people, express the complaint element of the lament. In brief, it is that God is far away from his people, exalted in lonely isolation in his unapproachable holiness and glory. He has "withheld" his "might" and "compassion" from them (63:15). This is not right because God is the true "Father" (63:16) of Israel, much more so than the mere physical ancestors, "Abraham" and Jacob ("Israel"). This is a profound insight. Isaiah understands that Israel is not merely an ethnic, linguistic, or national group. They are first and foremost a spiritual group. They are who they are because of the covenant love of God, who is not merely the "Father" of the nation but also its "Redeemer." If that love should ever be withdrawn, their reason for existence would be called into question.

Yet that seems to be precisely what has happened. The people "wander from" God's "ways" with hardened hearts that do not know how to fear him (NIV, "do not revere you"). It is not clear to what extent the prophet is merely representing what the people are saying or is speaking for himself. Most likely he is speaking for the people, who are trying to disclaim some of the responsibility for their own condition. To say that they are sinning because God will not let them do otherwise is a gross slander of God, which God summarily rejects in 65:1.

To be sure, unless God softens the depraved and hardened human heart, there is no way we can ever turn to him (cf. 1:9). But the fact is, he has already done all that is necessary for that softening to occur. What is missing is the human will to appropriate what God has done. God does not have to be implored to "return" (Isa. 63:17) to his people. As Malachi says (Mal. 3:6), God has not changed. If his people will return to him, he will return to them.

Isaiah 63:18–19 continues the complaint, saying that although Israel, "your people," once "possessed your holy place" and were "yours from of old," it is now as if they had never "been called by your name." "Enemies have trampled down your sanctuary," with all that implies of either God's helplessness or his lack of concern. As those in despair often do, the speaker has magnified the tragic and minimized the positive. God's people carried his name and possessed his sanctuary for a long time. But looking back, it seems like such a short time.

The Petition (64:1–5)

ISAIAH MOVES FROM complaint to petition, calling on God in the name of the people to leave his isolation in the "heavens" and to come to their aid (64:1). The reason for his doing so has been noted throughout this part of the book: that the nations may know the "name" (64:2) of God, that is, that they might know exactly who God is, the sole Sovereign of the universe. Only when those nations see God blessing and defending a transformed people will they recognize him appropriately.

God's actions in the past demonstrate that this petition is not based in fantasy (Isa. 64:3–4). Whenever God had manifested himself in the past, dramatic things occurred, from the parting of the Red Sea (Ex. 14:21–22) to the stopping of the rain for three years (1 Kings 17:1). Nor were these

merely divine fireworks. Unlike any of the other so-called gods, the Lord performed his miracles on the behalf of his people. In sum, God can act and he has acted, so it is not foolish to ask him to act again.

But if Isaiah knows that God can act, he also knows that there are conditions for that to occur (Isa. 64:4–5). God acts in behalf of those who "wait for him," that is, those who put their trust in him and not in their own devices (cf. 30:18; 40:31). One evidence of such a trust is a life of godliness. To "remember [his] ways" is not merely an intellectual awareness of God's character and expectations, nor is it only to give intellectual assent to those matters. Rather, as Deuteronomy shows, it is to live in accord with those "ways" (cf. Deut. 8:10–20).

That is confirmed by the parallel phrase "gladly do right" (Isa. 64:5). Relationship with a holy God while doing what is contrary to his character is a contradiction of terms. Yet the prophet admits that is exactly what has happened. Far from remembering God's ways by following them, the people of God have sinned against those ways. Thus, instead of God's presence being a blessing to the people, it has become a curse. So while it is theoretically possible to petition God to break through the barriers of time and space and make them a righteous people, their very unrighteousness prevents the petition from being heard. How indeed can they "be saved"?

The Contradiction (64:6–7)

THE RECOGNITION OF the contradiction at the end of 64:5 is now expanded. If the people tended to blame God for their hard-heartedness, at least they did not minimize the reality of their condition. They could not have a relationship with God and fulfill their mandate of being a light to the nations as long as they continued to live lives that were a reproach to his holy character. They are "unclean"; even the "righteous" things they do are defiled and contaminated (64:6).⁵ This underlines the Old Testament understanding that sin is not first of all behavioral dysfunction but rather an offense against the very nature of life, which finally must end in death and decay.

This thought is continued with the image of a dead leaf swept away on a wind of sin. Further reflection occurs in 64:7. What is it to be among the people of God? How is one's life to be lived out in a believer? Is it a matter of discipline and commitment? No, first of all it is a matter of laying "hold"

of God, of calling on his "name." It is to be in a vital relationship of dependence and self-renunciation. When that is so, right behavior will follow. But if right behavior becomes the focus, that behavior quickly becomes self-serving and is reduced to nothing more than "filthy rags." God's "face" cannot help but be "hidden" from such people, and they are left to "waste away" in their "sins" (64:7). Here we are at the conundrum again: We are wasting away in our sins because we won't turn to you, and we won't turn to you because you have hidden your face from us. What is to be done?

The Petition Repeated (64:8–12)

ISAIAH CRIES OUT again for God to take unilateral action. Surely God can break the cycle, stop the punishment, and restore his people to himself. These final verses of the lament, then, reiterate the petition. Once again Isaiah asserts that the nation only exists because of God, the "Father," who brought them into existence, the "potter" who formed their "clay" on his wheel (64:8). He should not allow the people's "sins" to make him forget that they are his creation (64:9), nor should he overlook the fact that all the "sacred" spaces that he presumably treasures are in "ruins" (64:10–11). The closing verse picks up the original plea of 63:15. The Lord must not "hold [himself] back"; he must not be "silent" while he goes on punishing them relentlessly.

Bridging Contexts

A STRAW MAN? As I remarked in footnote 6, we may wonder if this block of material (63:15–64:12) is not a "setup"—the presentation of a "straw man" that can be demolished in the next segment. And, indeed, that demolition is precisely what happens. In 65:1–16 God replies to this lament with devastating directness, demonstrating that the responsibility for the people's condition lies precisely with them and not on his shoulders. If this "setup" scenario is correct, then Isaiah is consciously presenting the false argument as clearly and as convincingly as he can so that when the returnees from the Exile are tempted to say these things, they will discover that the prophet has already said it even better than they could!

At the same time, the very passion and poignancy of the material suggests that while the "setup" scenario may be correct, it is more than a "straw man." There is more than a degree of truth in what is said here, and we cannot simply dismiss it. The relationship between the human will and the divine will is a complex one that modern theological parties tend to reduce to "sound bites." Arminians sometimes suggest that God is looking on, anxiously wringing his hands while wondering what we humans are going to do next. But Calvinists can make it appear that God merely needs to consult his vast blueprint to determine what each one of us will be compelled to do next.

A careful student of the Bible recognizes that both of those oversimplifications misrepresent the biblical positions. In fact, I would go so far as to say that *any* attempt to reduce the biblical data to a neatly complete system fully comprehensible to the human mind results in a defective system. The most recent example of this is process theology and its evangelical twin, the so-called "openness of God." These two positions have determined that the only way to preserve the reality of human free will is to posit a God who does not know the future and who is as much a part of the unfolding of existence as we are. Despite the best intentions of the open theists, any attempt to make a place for free will by limiting the degree to which God knows and can predict the future ends up with a God who is less than the One described in the Bible.

The problem with both oversimplifications is just that: They are oversimplifications. They attempt to make the ways of the infinite God conform to the limitations of human reason. From the outset such an enterprise is doomed to failure. If God's ways can be made perfectly intelligible to my finite brain, then he is no longer God. The challenge is to hold simultaneously two positions that *from within our limitations* seem mutually contradictory. From within those limitations, God must either be sovereign or we must be free. But the Bible maintains both, and that means, as difficult as it may be, we must make room for both in our thinking.

Paradox in practice. What does that mean in practice? It means that I cannot evade responsibility for my actions. I cannot say, "It's not my fault; God made me do it." At the same time, it means that God is not merely an interested bystander, watching the drama of unfolding human choices. God's holy, redemptive will is going to be accomplished in life, either

through me or in spite of me. It also means that there will be an ongoing interaction between God's will and my choices.

This is nowhere better seen than in the account of the "hardening" of Pharaoh's heart (Ex. 4:21; etc.). Did God do something to Pharaoh that was contrary to something this man or any other Egyptian pharaoh would have done under normal circumstances? Not in the least! This was not a kindly, gentle man, concerned to do the best he could for a "minority" in his kingdom. Rather, this man was prepared to do anything in order to secure his power base, including genocide. But he became that sort of person as a result of choices he had made over his lifetime.

God has designed this world so that our choices successively form us into persons we have no other choice but to be. Thus, the Bible says that God knew Pharaoh would harden his heart (Ex. 3:19), that Pharaoh did harden his heart (8:15), that Pharaoh's heart became hard (7:13), and that God hardened Pharaoh's heart (7:3). All are true. The point is that Pharaoh felt he was God with an absolute range of choices he could make if he wanted. In fact, that was not the case. Pharaoh was a creature in a world he had not designed and where his choices and his ability to choose had become strictly limited.⁸

Thus, in this passage it is not true that God *made* the people sin. He did not do it to them, and he does not do it to us. They chose to sin—and chose to do so against God's clearly expressed will. On the other hand, having chosen to sin, it became easier and easier for them to sin and harder and harder for them to stop. This is the way God has made his world.

Thus, it *is true* that unless God intervenes and breaks this pattern, there is no way it is going to be broken. It is true that if God does not choose to intervene, people are going to continue in their sin and the consequent alienation from God, from God's creation and from their truest selves. But (and here is the rub) this is not merely a matter of God's deciding whether to intervene. The question is, will they meet the necessary conditions for that intervention to occur? Will they cry, as the Galilean man did hundreds of years later, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24)? That is, were God's people willing to have certain patterns of behavior broken in their lives? Were they willing to have certain precious ties broken? Or did they want God's blessings *while they continued to do what*

they had always done? The fact is, we humans want to have our way and God's blessings. That can never be.

Contemporary Significance

POSSIBILITIES. We live in a world that has increasingly come to accept the mind-set of the old world. One of the reasons immigrants came to the new world was because of the limited options of the old world. The lines of class and place were firmly fixed when a person was born. What you would be and where you would do it were determined from your first cry.

Not so in America. "The sky's the limit" is more than just a cliché. While it is not totally true, there is more than a grain of truth in the conviction that the only limitations on a person here are those that person places on himself or herself. The only limits are those of vision and diligence. We really believe that all have been created equal in terms of opportunity. Of course, there have been tragic departures from this dream. The slaves from Africa were excluded from it, as were many women. But even though the opportunities for American women were markedly less than those for American men, they were still vastly improved over many European women.

That consciousness of unlimited possibilities certainly resonates with the biblical message. That message flatly contradicts the view of paganism that saw all of life as directed by the fates, where the position of the stars on the day of your birth determined the possibilities for the rest of your life. In a stunning contrast, the Bible declares that every person has real choices to make regarding the meaning and purpose of life and that every person will be held accountable for those choices. If those choices are good ones, unlimited possibilities open up. If they are bad ones, no position or status can change the results. It does not matter if the person is a David; sin will have its effects. But neither does it matter if the person is an eighty-year-old runaway like Moses; obedience will reap a harvest that will bear fruit to the end of time.

So the new world has been a place where the biblical message can bear fruit in spectacular ways. The idea that *anybody* can be converted regardless of their past life and can become a new person in Christ makes perfect sense. It does not matter what people have done or what kind of a terrible

background they come from; God can remake them and bring something bright and clean and new out of it. Does that message pay inadequate attention to some of the conditionings of life? Yes. Does it sometimes bring despair because it seems to offer more than it can deliver? Undoubtedly. Nevertheless, expectations can mean everything when it comes to possibilities. Those who expect little are often able to receive no more than they expect. On the other hand, there are no such limitations on those who expect much.

Overcoming the backward slide. Today in America we are sliding back into a belief in fate. There are a number of reasons for this. One is that it is a frankly easier view of life, and increasingly we are looking for the easy way out of everything. We don't want to work for what we receive; instead, we want to get it handed to us. The rise of state-run lotteries and state-sponsored gambling institutions is both a symptom of this situation and a contributing factor to it. Thus, it is easy to believe that since my situation is all determined for me, I cannot be expected to rise above it.

A second factor is, of course, the rise of the naturalistic behavioral sciences, which, having no other model from which to explain life than a mechanistic one, see us as nothing other than the sum total of our biological and sociological conditionings. The idea that any of us can possibly transcend these and take control of our conditioning is not only bizarre, it is hateful, because it introduces into the equation a factor that cannot be quantified.

A third factor is the fact that our lives have become much more complex. Success or failure no longer seems to depend as much on our own efforts and will. There seem to be so many more outside contributing factors now.¹⁰

This attitude has come to infect our religious thinking as well. Much like the ancient Judeans, we see ourselves as helpless victims. We don't like our sinful condition and admit that it is far from what God would like us to be —and even what we would like to be. But we feel helpless to change. It is "just the way I am," and no one can do anything about it. Perhaps if God would break in and make me a different kind of person, things might be different. And God knows, I have asked him to do that often enough, but he just doesn't seem to do it. Thank God for the grace of Jesus that tells me I am accepted anyway. This is the line of those who feel they are religiously fated. They cannot live out the life of Christ in the world unless they

become other than what their psychological conditioning has made them to be, and since that does not happen, they cannot become Christlike.

Years ago a wise pastor under whose ministry I had the good fortune to sit helped me to see that such an attitude is a "cop-out." God is not going to make us into different persons from what we are. If we think that redemption is to have our personality destroyed, we have misunderstood what it means for God to be the Creator. He loves the unique features that make each of us different from every other person on this planet. Why would he destroy what he has expressly made?

To be sure, what he has made has become corrupted, deeply and desperately so. But that does not mean his creation must be destroyed. It must be cleansed and purified but not destroyed. It is one thing to be impulsive and passionate; it is another to be ruled by an uncontrollable temper. That temper is like a cancer in the personality, and it must be done away with. But when it is, that person can still expect to be impulsive and passionate, though now with constructive results. God does not want to make you and me into persons other than who we are. What he wants to do is to free us from the blights on our personalities that in fact blur our uniqueness and make us just like millions of other sinful people.

But how is that cleansing and purifying to take place? Here is the difficulty. We want God to "zap" us, to do something to us so that there will be no more struggle in our relationship with him. That is not the way it takes place. We hear the apostle Paul saying "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body so that I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (1 Cor. 9:25–27). We hear him telling us that those who belong to Christ have "crucified the 'flesh'" (self-willed living; NIV "the sinful nature," Gal. 5:24). In other words, it is up to us to appropriate the spiritual power that is ours in the Cross and in the Holy Spirit.

God has already placed his Spirit in every believer (Rom. 8:9). So we do not need to "get" the Holy Spirit. What we need to do is to turn him loose, as we believe God will make us like himself, as we identify those specific behaviors that are an offense to him, and as we isolate the causes of those behaviors, learn what triggers them in us, avoid the places where we are likely to fall into them, celebrate our successes, stop beating ourselves for our failures, and walk on. God's power is unleashed in us when we step

toward him in faith, take the hammer in hand, and do what we need to do in order to crucify the self-will that is God's enemy.

Isaiah 65:1–16

"I REVEALED MYSELF to those who did not ask for me;

I was found by those who did not seek me.

To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, 'Here am I, here am I.'

²All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people,

who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations—

³a people who continually provoke me to my very face,

offering sacrifices in gardens and burning incense on altars of brick;

⁴who sit among the graves and spend their nights keeping secret vigil;

who eat the flesh of pigs, and whose pots hold broth of unclean meat:

⁵who say, 'Keep away; don't come near me,

for I am too sacred for you!'
Such people are smoke in my nostrils,
a fire that keeps burning all day.

6"See, it stands written before me:I will not keep silent but will pay back in full;

I will pay it back into their laps—

7both your sins and the sins of your fathers,"
says the LORD.

"Because they burned sacrifices on the mountains and defied me on the hills, I will measure into their laps the full payment for their former deeds."

⁸This is what the LORD says:

"As when juice is still found in a cluster of grapes and men say, 'Don't destroy it, there is yet some good in it,' so will I do in behalf of my servants; I will not destroy them all.

9I will bring forth descendants from Jacob, and from Judah those who will possess my mountains; my chosen people will inherit them, and there will my servants live.

10 Sharon will become a pasture for flocks, and the Valley of Achor a resting place for herds, for my people who seek me.

11"But as for you who forsake the LORD and forget my holy mountain, who spread a table for Fortune and fill bowls of mixed wine for Destiny,
12 I will destine you for the sword, and you will all bend down for the slaughter;
for I called but you did not answer, I spoke but you did not listen.
You did evil in my sight and chose what displeases me."

¹³Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

"My servants will eat, but you will go hungry; my servants will drink, but you will go thirsty; my servants will rejoice, but you will be put to shame. ¹⁴My servants will sing out of the joy of their hearts, but you will cry out from anguish of heart and wail in brokenness of spirit. ¹⁵You will leave your name to my chosen ones as a curse; the Sovereign LORD will put you to death, but to his servants he will give another name.

Whoever invokes a blessing in the land will do so by the God of truth;
he who takes an oath in the land will swear by the God of truth.
For the past troubles will be forgotten and hidden from my eyes.

Original Meaning

THESE SIXTEEN VERSES constitute God's answer to the preceding lament. While some scholars dispute this, saying that there is really no answer to the charge that God has been silent, the fact is God answers the real issue: the continuing rebellion of the people. They have sought to placate God with a reliance on cult and liturgy that is as offensive to him as any of the pagan worship. They have relied on their status as the elect of God while continuing to live lives of self-willed, self-serving sin. They call themselves the "servants of God," but they are not.

God's Continuing Revelation (65:1)

THE OPENING VERSE addresses this issue in ways that cannot be mistaken.² In the previous section, 64:7 stated that "no one calls on [God's] name," because "you have hidden your face from us." Isaiah 65:1 directly refutes that statement by saying that in fact God had "revealed" himself to people who did not call on his name. In other words, the reason they did not call on him was *not* because he had not revealed himself to them. He has been continually revealing himself. The problem lay in the people, not in God.

Israel's Problem (65:2–7)

So what was their problem? They have been "obstinate" (*sorer*, see also Isa. 1:23; 30:1), walking in "not good" ways that they have devised for themselves. These three ideas—obstinacy, devising one's own ways, and ways that are not good—describe in a brief compass precisely what the human problem is. Rather than obediently submitting to the ways of living that the Creator has designed for us, we have rebelled and tried to devise other ways of living for ourselves. By definition, "good" is that which corresponds to the Creator's plan (cf. Gen. 1:3; etc.). Therefore, anything we try to replace those ways with is, by definition, "not good."

So what is it we humans have devised? We have devised worship practices that we believe will make it possible to manipulate God to act in our favor while we retain the option to live our lives for ourselves. This was the function of heathen ritual. By doing certain things here on earth, the pagans believed that the attitudes and behaviors of the gods were automatically altered. The attitude of the worshiper was unimportant; what mattered was whether the ritual was done correctly. If so, then the desired results could be expected.

That is the very attitude that Isaiah sees in his pious readers. Why is God not more evident in their public and private lives? Why does he not make them act in just and righteous ways? The reason, he says, is that, to use the imagery of Joel, they are tearing their garments in rituals of repentance while their hearts are left whole to serve themselves (cf. Joel 2:12–13). They are depending on their position as God's people and on ritualistic religion to manipulate God in their favor while they continue to disobey the terms of their covenant with him.

The worship practices described in Isa. 65:3–5, 7 look markedly like the preexilic Canaanite practices that were so attractive to the Israelites. What are they doing here in this section of Isaiah? There are three possible explanations for this. (1) The returnees from exile are continuing to engage in these practices. But even those who take this point of view admit that there is no convincing evidence outside of Isaiah 56–66 in support of it. (2) Other scholars see this as evidence the book was written by a preexilic prophet and was addressed to preexilic people. But what is being said in these chapters is much more intelligible if we understand the general context to be the postexilic period. (3) The preexilic prophet is using images with which he is familiar to talk about the response of God to postexilic ritualism. This last one seems to me to be the most likely explanation.

The prophet does not intend these verses to be taken literally. Rather, he is throwing together a collection of the most horrendous images he can think of to try to convey how disgusting God finds ritualism *of any sort* when it is not expressing the important thing, a changed heart. Thus, I doubt that the returnees were actually engaging in these behaviors. But if they gave a whole burnt offering just as prescribed in Leviticus in an attempt to force God to forgive their sins and to bless them while they kept on sinning, the prophet says they might as well be sitting in a tomb and drinking mouse broth (see 66:3, where this very point is made).

In these circumstances, the people's pretensions to holiness procured by ritual magic are ludicrous (65:5). That being the case, they might rather prefer for God to remain silent instead of responding to their lament and rending the heavens to speak to them! But the prophet says God "will not keep silent" (65:6). They want God to act? Well, act he will—and he will fully repay them for all they have done (65:7).

A Remnant of the Faithful (65:8–11)

BUT IF GOD CASTIGATES the spurious holiness of those who think that they can manipulate him through their rituals, it does not mean that there is no remnant of the faithful among the people. Just as in Elijah's day (1 Kings 19:18), if many in the nation abandon the truth in the postexilic period, there will also be many who do not. God's promises to create himself a people will not return to him void (Isa. 55:11). These are the ones God calls his "servants." While the behavior that marks these as God's servants is not

specified here, its content can be safely inferred. These are the people who "seek" the Lord (65:10).

What does seeking the Lord mean? This is the language of Deuteronomy. "But if from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deut. 4:29). To seek the Lord is to seek his ways, to seek to please him, to seek his presence. These are the primary goals of a believer, not his blessings. Moreover, seeking involves one's whole being. Ultimately, it is expressed in the language of Deuteronomy 6:5: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." The servants of God stand in stark contrast with those who try to bypass a submissive relationship with God and seek to gain control of their "destiny" through religious behavior (Isa. 65:11).

God's Promises Remain (65:12–16)

GOD HAS NOT abrogated his promises. "Jacob" will have "descendants," and "Judah" will possess the "land" of promise (cf. 65:9). But that does not mean everyone called by the names of Jacob or Judah will share in the promise. As 56:1 stated and as 66:18–24 will reiterate, it is not birthright but behavior that marks the servants of God. Thus, 65:13–16 details the differences between "you" (i.e., those who have been trying to manipulate God for blessings) and "my servants" (i.e., those who seek God for himself with changed lives). In fact, the very blessings that the manipulators sought and were denied will fall on the servants who seek God first and his blessings only secondarily.⁴

Bridging Contexts

THE ESSENCE OF RELIGION. In every age the human problem seems to be the same. We want benefits without personal cost. The greatest good is seen to be personal freedom expressed ultimately in the right to determine what is right ("good") and wrong ("evil") for ourselves. That is, we are determined to deny the fact of creation. We refuse to admit that there is a Creator who has defined the norms of human existence and that these norms are nonnegotiable. As a result, God calls and calls to us (65:1, 12), but we do not hear. At the same time we accuse him of being unresponsive

to our calls. We are deaf to him because we want him to speak to us on our terms. We want him to approve our sinful self-reliance and wonder why he is silent.

In fact, he is not silent at all. It is as though we refuse to purchase cable television service and then accuse the television broadcasters of not broadcasting anything because we cannot get programs on channel 73. The signals are all there; it is just that we have not met the conditions for receiving them.

The problem is compounded when we bring religion into the picture. As the tragedies of September 11, 2001, have made clear, the idea that a purely secular culture is a possibility is a fiction. In crises, the native human religiosity manifests itself again, much to the disgust of the committed secularists. What is religion? Paul Tillich said it was to have a concern for ultimate issues.⁵ Frankly, I think it is much more mundane than that. I believe religion is the attempt to get on the good side of whatever forces I conceive to have control of my destiny by the easiest and simplest means possible.

That being so, and given our deep need to keep control of the core of our being, externals come to play the central part in our religious lives. If I think God likes praising, I will praise. If I think God wants praying, I will pray. If I think God wants offerings, I will offer. If I think God wants abstinence, I will abstain. If I think God wants obedience, I will obey. But none of these behaviors is for its own sake. They are all means to obtain blessing. Therefore, I will calculate to the finest point possible the minimum of these I can give and still get the blessing.

The problem is that God doesn't want these things. By themselves he finds them disgusting. They are so because they are one more expression of human pride. It is as though we say, "Alright, God, you have a commodity I want, and I have some things you want. So let's engage in a little trade. I give you what you want and you give me what I want. But you need to recognize, God, if you don't give me what I want, you're not going to get what you want."

Such activity is not the behavior of a servant of God. A servant of God recognizes that God needs nothing, that he has already freely given everything I need or want, and that in fact, there is nothing I could ever do to earn these things. The two of us are not now, and never will be, on

anything like a par. Rather, what I need is God's presence in my life, and that presence is only possible when I renounce my right to myself and in a paroxysm of love and gratitude hurl myself into his arms, committed with all my being to be like him, simply because I want to.

Contemporary Significance

ATTITUDES SPEAK LOUDER THAN ACTIONS. What does it mean to be a Christian? In all too many ways we find ourselves in a similar position to those Isaiah is addressing in this passage. We gauge our faith on the basis of certain externals.

- So one person says, "I am a Christian because I am a formal member of that body of people known as the Christian church. I am a Christian in just the same way that the Judeans were members of the people of God. We may say that we are adopted, but the relationship is the same: We are members of an elect group."
- Someone else says, "That is not true. Church membership means nothing. You must have received Christ as your personal Savior. Then you are a member of the church universal. You are part of the family forever."
- A third person says, "That is really not any necessary indication of your heart condition. A Christian attends worship with the body on a regular basis. Christians worship God with sacraments and music and prayer and the hearing of the Word of God."
- Another says, "There is more dead form at 11:00 A.M. on Sunday than any other hour of the week. Christians feel the presence of God in their hearts when they worship him spontaneously and energetically."
- Finally, someone else says, "What you're 'worshiping' is the exciting feel of worshiping. A Christian is someone who gives a cup of cold water to the thirsty, a coat to the freezing, a word of encouragement to the despairing, all for Christ's sake."

Well, what *is* it to be a Christian, for heaven's sake? I believe it is all of the above and none of the above. What do I mean? That with the right attitude every one of the above is characteristic of the Christian, and that with the wrong attitude every criticism of the above is correct. That is, if we gauge our Christian faith by external behaviors alone—any external behaviors—it is all dust and ashes. So a Malachi can say for God, "I am sick of your worship. I just wish you would shut the doors and go away" (cf. Mal. 1:10). Unless we have come to the place where our service to God is growing out of a glad servant heart, it is all in vain. Can you imagine a bridegroom asking a minister how many hours a month he has to spend with his bride to keep the marriage in force? If he does ask this question, we know something is severely lacking in his devotion to his bride, and we also know the relationship is doomed.

By contrast, if we really have a loving bond-slave relationship with the Lord, we will want to express that love in every possible way, from meeting together with Christian brothers and sisters to worshiping him in the most profound ways possible, to telling others about him, to reaching out to the downtrodden for him, to working for justice in his world. So Malachi can say to the people that if they truly love God, it will not be a problem to give their best, and Haggai can say that if they are truly God's servants, they will show it by building God's house. The point, then, is this: If external behaviors are in place of a loving servant heart, they are worthless, but if a loving servant heart does not express itself in external behaviors, we are deceiving ourselves.

Isaiah 65:17-25

17"BEHOLD, I WILL create new heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.
18But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create,
for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy.
19I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people;
the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more.

Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years;
he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth;
he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed.
They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

fruit.

22No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat.

For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands.

23They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune;

for they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendants with them. ²⁴Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear.

25The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent's food.

They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,"

says the LORD.

Original Meaning

THESE VERSES OPEN up one of the critical aspects of biblical revelation. God had a basic problem to confront as he began to reveal himself to the Hebrew people. They were surrounded by peoples who believed this visible world was actually only a dim reflection of the invisible world of the gods. What was really important took place in that world, preconditioning everything that took place here. Thus, human beings had no real choices to make but simply reduplicated the actions of the gods.

That is, of course, wholly untrue. This is a real world, and humans do have real choices to make, choices that have cosmic consequences. So, to make that point, for much of the Old Testament, God makes no reference to any reality beyond this world at all. Our choices are made here, and the effects are experienced here. This is a real world.

But this world is not all there is to reality. If we have gotten the point that this world is real and is not merely a reflection of invisible realities, we are perhaps ready to have the curtain pulled back in order to get a glimpse of the rest of reality. That is what is happening here. The fact is that all the effects of human choice are not experienced in this life. Justice is not entirely served here, as any of us can relate. All the good that is done here is not rewarded here, and all the evil that is done here is not punished here. So if God says that his servants will be blessed, as he did in 65:13–16, either he

is a liar, or this world is not all there is to reality. These verses tell us that the latter is the case.

But this is not an accommodation to a pagan view, as some students of apocalyptic maintain. It is not the *real* heaven and earth that is now revealed, nor the *real* Jerusalem that is let down from heaven. Rather, they are *new* (65:17). What that means is that God will "create" something that, while being in continuity with what had been, will yet be a completely new expression of that reality (see comments on 43:14–21). The earthly realities give shape to the new realities instead of the earthly expression being merely a duplication of what already exists in heaven. But because they are new, the tragic realities of this world need not be repeated there. Thus, we may experience the reality of joy without the reality of weeping (65:18–19). Likewise, we may experience the delight of birth without the despair of death (65:20). The satisfaction of building will not be accompanied by the fear of destruction and conquest (65:21–23).

So God says that what he has said is true: Those who believe his word, who obey him, and who live his life *will* be "blessed" (65:23). There are consequences to our choices; they begin now and will come to their ultimate fruition when the Creator concludes his creative activity in the coming days. The language of 65:25 is closely related to the vision of the messianic kingdom in chapter 11, with the final line of the verse being an exact duplicate of the first colon of 11:9. This makes it plain that what we have here is not merely a poetic expression of the certainty of justice in some general sense but a prediction of real events in the age to come.

Bridging Contexts

THE DUALISM AND FATALISM of paganism are never far from us. Nowhere is that more clear than in our thinking about the existence of good and evil in the world. It is easy for us to think that sin is in the world because of Satan. God is the good god and Satan the bad god; these two are at war, and we humans are the chess pieces on their board or, to put it another way, the game pieces in a cosmic session of some giant computer war game. Thus good and evil are the cosmic realities, and we are fated to play the part chosen for us. One expression of this can be seen in the tattoos of many prison inmates with some version of "Born to be bad" or "Born for Hell."

But that is not true. The Bible tells us that sin is in the world for one reason only: human choice. Satan did not make Eve sin, nor is there anything in Genesis about the tempter's being sinful. It is only said that he is more "subtle" than any other creature. Whatever Satan may have done before earthly time began had no conditioning effect on the choices of Eve and then Adam. Creation was in a pristine condition even though Satan was in it. And if our first two parents had not sinned, the clear implication is that creation would still be in that pristine condition today.

My point is that it is human choice that determines the shape of reality, not cosmic reality that shapes human choice. There will be a slain Lamb on the throne of heaven because we humans have sinned. We were not doomed to sin because there had to be a slain Lamb on the throne of heaven.

Thus, as we look to the new heaven and the new earth, we must not think that because they are coming, it doesn't matter what we do. The truth is the other way around. Because they are coming, we can choose to be faithful today, secure that if we live out our lives in poverty, justice will be served. We do not have to worry about the consequences of our actions being seen today, because we know that the reality that is to come will reflect our right choices. By the same token, we must remember that just because we "get away" with something now, that does not mean that wrong act is not being imprinted on the reality that is to come. We shape our future.

Contemporary Significance

EVANGELICALS SPEND a good deal of time arguing about "the Millennium." I remember an older gentleman who said to me when I was in college, "I grew up in a liberal church, so I was a postmillennialist. But then I saw the error of that, got converted, and became a premillennialist." This gives us a sense of how critical some considered this issue in the midst of the "modernist-fundamentalist" debates of the 1920s and 1930s.

Even today in some denominations, premillennialism is an article of faith. The specific issue, of course, is whether Christ returns before the establishment of the reign of God's righteousness on the earth or after. But the deeper issue is that of biblical interpretation: How literally is one to take poetic imagery? People whose general orthodoxy no one can doubt differ significantly on this subject. All orthodox persons agree that Christ will

return in physical form; what they disagree on is whether there will be a physical reign of Christ on earth prior to the final judgment and prior to the revelation of the new heaven and earth. If the language of Revelation 19–21 is given any literal credence at all, this seems to be the case, and it is where I stand personally.²

But as interesting as those arguments might be to some of us, the most important issue for us is to think about the implications of this theology for our daily lives. If it is true that the reality we experience in the days to come will be shaped by our choices now, then those choices are of critical importance. Far from saying with the television comic, "the devil made me do it," we need to be thinking about the cosmic effects of our choices on the world to come. Our actions are not predetermined. Instead, our actions will bear fruit from now on and forever. This ought to make us think a good deal more soberly about what we do. Far from being merely a duplicate of something that has always existed, we have the possibility of shaping the reality that is to come. This is what Paul meant when he said to Titus in Titus 2:11–13:

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

By the grace of God we have a coming world to look to. That being so, how should we live now to be assured that the reality we are shaping will be a joyous one? If it is true according to the old adage that "some people are so heavenly minded, they are no earthly good," it is also true, and perhaps more so today than previously, that there are many people who have effectively forgotten that the story we are telling has its end only on the other side of the grave.

Isaiah 66:1-24

THIS IS WHAT the LORD says:

"Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be? ²Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?" declares the LORD.

"This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word. ³But whoever sacrifices a bull is like one who kills a man. and whoever offers a lamb, like one who breaks a dog's neck; whoever makes a grain offering is like one who presents pig's blood, and whoever burns memorial incense, like one who worships an idol. They have chosen their own ways, and their souls delight in their abominations: ⁴so I also will choose harsh treatment for them and will bring upon them what they dread. For when I called, no one answered, when I spoke, no one listened. They did evil in my sight and chose what displeases me."

⁵Hear the word of the LORD, you who tremble at his word:
"Your brothers who hate you, and exclude you because of my name, have said,
'Let the LORD be glorified, that we may see your joy!'
Yet they will be put to shame.

⁶Hear that uproar from the city,

OHear that uproar from the city, hear that noise from the temple! It is the sound of the LORD repaying his enemies all they deserve.

7"Before she goes into labor,she gives birth;before the pains come upon her,she delivers a son.

⁸Who has ever heard of such a thing? Who has ever seen such things?

Can a country be born in a day or a nation be brought forth in a moment?

Yet no sooner is Zion in labor than she gives birth to her children.

⁹Do I bring to the moment of birth and not give delivery?" says the LORD.

"Do I close up the womb when I bring to delivery?" says your God.

10"Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her,

all you who love her; rejoice greatly with her,

all you who mourn over her.

¹¹For you will nurse and be satisfied at her comforting breasts;

you will drink deeply and delight in her overflowing abundance."

¹²For this is what the LORD says:

"I will extend peace to her like a river, and the wealth of nations like a flooding stream; you will nurse and be carried on her arm and dandled on her knees.

13 As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem."

14When you see this, your heart will rejoice and you will flourish like grass;
the hand of the LORD will be made known to his servants,
but his fury will be shown to his foes.
15See, the LORD is coming with fire, and his chariots are like a whirlwind;
he will bring down his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire.
16For with fire and with his sword the LORD will execute judgment upon all men, and many will be those slain by the LORD.

¹⁷"Those who consecrate and purify themselves to go into the gardens, following the one in the midst of those who eat the flesh of pigs and rats and other abominable things—they will meet their end together," declares the LORD.

¹⁸"And I, because of their actions and their imaginations, am about to come and gather all nations and tongues, and they will come and see my glory.

19"I will set a sign among them, and I will send some of those who survive to the nations—to Tarshish, to the Libyans and Lydians (famous as archers), to Tubal and Greece, and to the distant islands that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory. They will proclaim my glory among the nations. ²⁰And they will bring all your brothers, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the LORD—on horses, in chariots and wagons, and on mules and camels," says the LORD. "They will bring them, as the Israelites bring their grain offerings, to the temple of the LORD in ceremonially clean vessels. ²¹And I will select some of them also to be priests and Levites," says the LORD.

²²"As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me," declares the LORD, "so will your name and descendants endure. ²³From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me," says the LORD. ²⁴"And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind."

Original Meaning

THERE HAS BEEN considerable disagreement among commentators concerning the structure of this final chapter of Isaiah. In large measure this disagreement has resulted from uncertainty about the place and function of

66:5–6 and 15–16. Some scholars have taken them with the units preceding them, while others have taken them with what follows, while still others have treated them independently. Recently, however, a minor consensus has emerged (though not always as a result of the same reasoning) that the units should be seen as verses 1–6, 7–14, and 15–24.

A Final Diatribe Against Ritualism (66:1–6)

ALTHOUGH SOME HAVE taken 66:1 as an indication that some in the return from exile opposed rebuilding the temple, there is nothing in the biblical record to support such a claim.³ Rather, this verse should be put into the larger context of 66:1–6, which presents the prophet's final diatribe against ritualism. It is not that God has anything against the temple per se. In fact, he inspired the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to move the apathetic people to get on with the task of rebuilding. By the same token, he has nothing against sacrifices per se. He inspired Malachi to condemn those who refused to give their best animals. No, the point here is the same as that of 57:3–13 and 65:1–5: Empty ritualism that does not symbolize a genuinely repentant and obedient heart is worse than useless.

From the outset of the book and up to its very end, the central problem it has identified in the human race is that of self-exaltation. We try to solve the basic problem of our extreme fragility, both physically and psychologically, by lifting ourselves up in order to gain power. For it is by means of power that we can protect ourselves and ensure the satisfaction of whatever we consider our needs to be. When all is said and done, that is what ritualistic religion is about. The religious elite discover how to manipulate divine power.

But, in fact, that approach is all wrong. In this universe God alone is exalted, and any attempt by humans to exalt themselves and usurp God's power for themselves is doomed to fail. So God says here that it is the "humble and contrite in spirit," who tremble at his word, whom he esteems (66:2). To try to use ritual to enhance one's own power or to satisfy one's own needs is to do nothing other than to choose one's "own ways" (66:3), even if the rituals are those promulgated by God himself. Once again, God insists that it is not he who has been silent when they called, as they had charged in 64:12. Instead, the very opposite is true. He has "called," and they have been silent (66:4). They have devised their own ways of relating

to God, and when he calls them to a different kind of response, they are deaf.

In 66:5–6, God turns to speak once again to the remnant, those whom he designated as his "servants" in chapter 65. These are the people of whom he spoke in 66:2, those "who tremble at his word" (66:5). Because they have chosen lowliness and powerlessness, they are easily victimized by the powerful, who mock them for their simplistic piety. But God says that the lowly have one powerful thing going for them—God! He will vindicate those who care more about what God says than whether their needs have been met. In the very temple where the ritualists think they have God at their command, that God, who calls them his "enemies" (cf. 1:24), will pay them back for their rebellion.

Hope and Abundance (66:7–14)

As THROUGHOUT THE book, judgment and destruction quickly give way to hope and abundance. This next unit describes Lady Zion. Here the promise made in chapter 1 comes to its fruition. The dross has been purged away, and instead of being a harlot, Zion has become the faithful city, the mother of nations (cf. 1:25–27). The image of the fruitful mother reminds the attentive reader of all the places in the book where barrenness and childlessness were alluded to.⁴ The pagan fertility rituals were focused on the critical need to maintain the fertility of field and womb if life was to defeat death in the world. But Isaiah says that the only real life is that which is given as a free gift by God in response to surrender and obedience.

Nor does God give in a "tit for tat" fashion. His gifts are out of all proportion to whatever we have done. When humans meet their own needs, it is arduous and painful work, like giving birth. But God's gifts are childbirth without labor (66:7–9). Our needs are not met by our work but by our being in a position to receive the results of God's work. This is the significance of nursing at the "breasts" of Zion (66:11). A baby does nothing to satisfy its own needs; it must simply own its absolute dependence and receive what has been provided.

In such a position there is rest, rejoicing, and wholeness, or "peace" (66:12). As in 12:1 and elsewhere,⁵ the idea behind the word "comfort" (66:13) is to encourage. Those who have felt the weight of their sin, have known their own powerlessness to deal with that sin, but have still come to

God in penitent faith, believing that he can do something about it, will find themselves encouraged just as a child does on its mother's lap. The case is not hopeless, all is not lost, this thing can be recovered from. That is comfort.

But if judgment is never God's intended last word, neither is hope without conditions. Isaiah never wants his readers to be left in a position where they are so secure in God's election love that they forget the real possibility of judgment. The Lord's "hand" (66:14) of deliverance, redemption, and power will be revealed to "his servants," but it is "his fury" that "will be shown to his foes." Once again the question emerges: Am I among his servants or his foes?

Judgment and Hope (66:15–24)

THIS SECTION CONCLUDES the book in a characteristic fashion, with an interplay of the twin themes of judgment and hope. Just as the two have been intertwined throughout the book, they are intertwined here. The beginning (66:15–17) and the end (66:24) speak of the judgment that lies ahead for those who rebel against God and attempt to gain control of his power for themselves. For the present God has taken the fire of his judgment into himself in the person of his Servant. But that will not always be so. A day will come when that "fire" (66:15–16, 24) will be unleashed against an unrepentant world.

Judgment is a reality that humans must reckon with. Just as in the natural world, where there are inescapable consequences of our choices, so also in the spiritual world. Thus, instead of ending with 65:17–25 and its vision of the new heaven and the new earth, or even with chapters 60–62, with a picture of the light streaming from Zion, the book brings this grim note of judgment directly to the fore in its closing words.

But judgment is not what the Creator God wants, and that is equally clear in this final section. Isaiah 66:18–23 speak of the universal redemption that is God's desired way of bringing this sinful world to its close. Verse 18 is especially interesting in this regard. Although the text is difficult, the sense seems to be that God will use the very sins and schemes of the rebellious to reveal the glory of his salvation. The people of Zion ("them" in v. 19) who "survive" (see 4:2) all the attempts of an evil world to destroy them will be sent to all the "nations" with a "sign" of God's "glory." In one sense their

very survival will be the sign, but in view of the importance of "signs" in the ministry of Christ, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Christ is the sign they take—the preeminent evidence of God's glory in triumphing over evil. This, of course, accords closely with the thought of Isaiah 2 that Israel has a mission to declare God's glory to the nations in such a way that they will be drawn to him.

The response of the nations to Israel's mission will be to restore the last remnants of the Israelites ("your brothers," 66:20) to Israel in a last great ingathering. The breadth and the scope of this return is underlined by the variety of means used to make that possible. Its importance is emphasized by the comparison of that return to the bringing of the best and purest of "offerings."

Then comes the most stunning statement of all: "I will select some of them also to be priests and Levites" (66:21). While we cannot be absolutely certain of the antecedent of "them" in this statement, the most obvious one is "the nations." If that is correct, and most commentators agree that it is, this is the strongest statement in the book that the election of Israel is not for Israel but for the world. That understanding is furthered by 66:22–23, which speaks of the entire human race coming to worship God. This is the goal of all that God has done on earth—that we, his creatures, may have fellowship with him.

But what about 66:24? Why end the book on this grisly note? The answer goes as far back as chapter 1. There Isaiah could speak of the day when the unfaithful city, whose sins he has carefully delineated, will be transformed by righteousness and justice into "the Faithful City" (1:21–27). But just as he would not leave his hearers there in chapter 1, ending that chapter instead with an announcement of the destruction awaiting those who did not repent, neither will he leave them with unmitigated hope here. For the wonderful promises of God have nothing to do with any who persist in rebellion. If the rebels are lulled into complacency by these good promises, they will be lost.

On the one hand, the promises of God are yea and amen (2 Cor. 1:20): There *will* be a new heaven and a new earth (Isa. 66:22), and those who rejoice to worship the one true God *will* participate in it. On the other hand, whether any of us participate in those promises is strictly up to us, and Isaiah never wants that to be forgotten.

Bridging Contexts

A NUMBER OF the key themes of the book and of this final part of the book appear in this chapter: humility and contrition as opposed to ritualism and rebellion; God's gift of abundance to Lady Zion (as opposed to the fundamental barrenness of the earth mother of the nations); fire as a symbol of God's holiness, making it either destructive or cleansing; the place of the nations in the worship and service of God; and the ultimate goal of creation as worship and fellowship with the Creator. Most of these have been dealt with at some length even in recent chapters. Here I want to focus on three: humility and rebellion, the source of abundance, and the goal of life.

Humility and rebellion. In some ways the United States was born out of rebellion. Before that there was the Peasants' Revolt in Germany. In both of these cases, orthodox Christian leaders spoke out forcefully on the side of authority. Luther, for example, argued vehemently that the peasants were sinning against God in turning on their masters. In the case of the American Revolution, John Wesley wrote a tract employing his considerable force of logic and eloquence in calling on the American colonists to cease their revolt against their God-appointed king. This tract created such hostility against Wesley's followers in America, the Methodists, that some Methodist preachers had to return home to England and others, like Francis Asbury, had to go into hiding during most of the Revolution. This means that we Americans have a soft spot in our hearts for rebels, for people who refuse to be limited by the self-serving mandates of those in authority.

How does that bear on Isaiah's continually inveighing against rebels? It seems to me that there are two kinds of rebels. (1) There are the "good" rebels. These are people like most of the founders of America, who were reacting against injustice and wrong. They are also like inventors, people who are reacting against doing things the old way just because that is the way it has always been done. These are not people who merely have to have their own way and who refuse to be bound by any strictures except their own. They are simply looking for a better way. (2) The "bad" rebels are not looking for a better way. They do not care about the condition of others. They merely want their own way, no matter what it may cost or what it may destroy.

The difference between the two types of rebels is the difference between humility and arrogance. I think this is why Isaiah continually stresses that rebels try to create "their own ways." For these kinds of persons, it is not that the other ways—in this case, God's ways—are necessarily so bad; it is just that they want their own ways. Here is the deadliness of arrogance. Arrogance says, "Even if it kills me, I will do what I want." The fact is, God has made the world so that arrogance does, in fact, kill. It kills on a variety of levels. It kills relationships, it kills families, it kills churches, it kills companies. Some years ago, a student of business reached the shocking conclusion that one of the traits America's most excellent companies shared was "love." That is, they loved their product, they loved their employees, and they loved their consumers. However we may define love, it is at the least a focus beyond oneself.

That is what Isaiah is calling his hearers to: the kind of humility that is willing to project the focus of one's life not primarily on what is good for me but on what is good for those around me (Rom. 12:5–6). This is humility, focusing on others before oneself. This person may well become a "good" rebel, refusing to sit by while others are demeaned and oppressed by arrogant authorities. But the "rebellion," the refusal to submit, has nothing to do with some need to project myself, to have my way, to show "them" that "they can't boss me around." Humility, the self-forgetfulness that arises from a deep sense of worth and security, is the key to it all. Others may get the praise and the "perks" for awhile, but the truly humble know that in the end those are not the things that matter.

The source of abundance. Throughout Isaiah, as throughout the Bible, this question is stressed: Who supplies my needs? The answer is found in another of the divine paradoxes that fill the Bible: to grab is to lose, to let go is to get. That is, if I make my abundance the goal of my existence, I invariably discover that the abundance I have gained is an abundance of nothing.

A roustabout managed to rise through the ranks of his company until the day came when he owned the company. Later he said, "I gave everything I had to climb to the top of the heap. Then I discovered that the heap I was climbing was a manure heap." That story can be multiplied thousands of times. So in Isaiah 47 Lady Babylon looks out on a world she reduced to ruins and says, "I am, and there is none besides me" (47:8, 10). What she realizes too late is that in gaining everything, she has only gained ruins—

nothing. This picture is picked up and further developed in Revelation 18: Babylon is fallen.

The reason why this is so is that the world is not self-sustaining. When I was in high school, I spent a good deal of time trying to construct a perpetual motion machine. I was arrogant enough to think that even though no one else had ever done this, I could. Eventually I gave up and went on to other, often equally futile, enterprises. I had to admit that there must always be a supply of energy from outside a given system if that system is to continue to function.

At the time I did not realize the profound significance of the discovery I had made. There *are* no perpetual motion machines. That includes the physical universe. On every level, energy must come from somewhere beyond that level to keep it functioning. Yet we arrogant humans believe that somehow we are complete in ourselves and can, from within our own resources, supply our own needs. It is only when we, like trusting infants, relax in the embrace of Mother Zion that our needs are met from beyond ourselves. Who supplies Mother Zion's need? Zion's Creator and Lord, the source of all things. Surrendering all things to him, we gain all things.

The goal of life. The book of Isaiah ends with the world worshiping God. Interestingly, worship is where the book of Exodus, the Old Testament book that arguably defines the nature of salvation, ends as well. And most interestingly of all, that is where the Bible itself ends in the book of the Revelation.

What's the point? Let's begin with Exodus. Why does God bring his people out of Egypt? An unthinking answer might be so that he can take them into the land of Canaan. But then what is the purpose of Exodus 19–40? If the ultimate goal of the Exodus is the Conquest, then everything relating to the covenant and the tabernacle is just so much "filler." In fact, it is the other way around, as a study of the word "inheritance" shows. Canaan is the "inheritance" (or perhaps better, "special possession") of Israel, but *Israel* is the "inheritance" of the Lord." God brought the people of Israel out of Egypt in order to bring them, and through them the world, to himself (cf. Ex. 19:4). That is why Exodus ends as it does, with the people encamped around the tabernacle and the glory of the Lord filling the tabernacle. "Canaan," our blessing and bliss, is not the end; it is only a means to the

end, and that end is already announced in Exodus 40: worshipful fellowship with God.

That, then, is why the Bible ends on the same kind of note. Revelation 4–22 ultimately describes one continuing service of worship. What is going on? Is the God of the universe some megalomaniac who constantly needs to be told how great he is? Hardly! The point is that our life is not about us, just as the life of each member of the Trinity is not about himself. All too easily we think of the next life as a place where we are rewarded, where we finally get the "goodies," where we get blessed.¹² Not true. Just as here, where the greatest blessings of life are when we become part of something greater than ourselves, so it will be in the next life. When we are taken up into the glory and wonder of the Creator, when we lose ourselves in the joy and love that radiates from him, when we know what it is to be united with, but not absorbed into, the One whose greatest delight is in us whom he has made, we will have truly found ourselves forever.

Contemporary Significance

THE INEVITABLE CHOICE. This Sunday school chorus captures the heart of this chapter:

One door and only one, and yet its sides are two. I'm on the inside; on which side are you?

This chapter is about the fundamental choice facing humanity. Those who confess that Israel's God is Creator of the universe and accept his created ways in humility will enjoy fellowship with him in a new heaven and a new earth. Those who deny that reality, arrogantly seeking to define the terms of their existence for themselves, will perish eternally.

This fact has some important implications for us today. (1) We must be careful not to minimize the reality of this choice in our presentation of the biblical message. It is often said that people today respond better to positive messages than to negative ones. I suspect that is not more true than it has ever been. But the danger we run is in failing to warn people about the risk of refusing the positive message. We may fail to communicate to people that this is a life-or-death issue. We tell people that God loves them and has

a wonderful plan for their lives. Do we ever tell them what happens if they reject God's wonderful plan? A person is in the backseat of a car hurtling out of control down a hill toward a sharp turn and a sheer cliff. Do we only tell them that if they jump out life will be less anxious? Do we consider the reality of these options in our own decisions?

(2) One of the tragedies of modern child-rearing theory is that we have forgotten that always allowing a child to "have it your way" is ultimately deadly, because it fails to teach the child that our choices have inescapable consequences. But this is difficult. Only those who have attempted to rear children know how rock-hard a child's determination is to have his or her own way. Somehow we who are parents must steel ourselves to the inevitable conflict of the will that *must* occur as we try to bring our children to surrender their own way or face the consequences. This is the only way to strength of character and, much more seriously, the only way to heaven.

Adults who have always had their own way and have been shielded from the consequences of those choices by indulgent parents are almost impervious to the good news of Christ. They refuse to take responsibility for their actions and thus have nothing to repent of. The idea that Jesus asks them to give their lives away in worshipful service to him is more than offensive to such persons. Let us remember that it is not merely our children's future as contributors to society that is at stake, it is their eternal destiny.

The source of abundance. The fact that we cannot supply our own needs is another idea that seems radically countercultural today in a world of radical individuality and determined self-sufficiency. But it is a theme that runs through the Bible. It was self-sufficiency that tempted Adam and Eve, and it was self-sufficiency that Abraham surrendered and in so doing brought hope to the world. It was their inability to rely on God's sufficiency that doomed a whole generation to die in the desert. It was the need to supply their own needs that made so many Israelites susceptible to the blandishments of Baal and Asherah. In the end, it was the need to supply their own needs that drove the Pharisees to devise a means of earning a right standing with God.

We are no different. The idea of truly surrendering our needs to God and resting on his lap as serenely as a nursing baby is *very* difficult. How can we get there? (1) We must recognize our own grasping, self-sufficient

tendencies. (2) We must ask God to sensitize us to all the ways we try to satisfy our needs without depending on him, including the manipulation of him through rituals of one sort and another. (3) We must allow him to show us what our *real* needs are. (4) Finally, we must wait patiently for him to show us how he wants to meet the needs. Usually it will be through the ordinary means he has already placed in our hands. But when we engage in those, it will be entirely different from what it was before. Now we will realize that God is at work within us. No longer will we be tempted to praise ourselves for what we have accomplished (and in so doing thank ourselves for the gifts that God had actually given to us in the first place!). And sometimes he will satisfy our needs in ways that are completely beyond ourselves. Those are moments to be treasured for a lifetime, moments when we know beyond a doubt that God cares for us and that there is nothing he cannot or will not do for us.

The goal of life. This thought relates closely to the previous one. When we have learned to live in the constant relinquishment of our needs into God's hands, we learn that in the end our only real need is for him. With him, we have everything; without him, everything is nothing.

So many people make God a means to the end of blessing. They serve him to get something else. That leads to the perverted view of heaven as a place where I get riches. God? Jesus? The Holy Spirit? Oh yes, they'll be around someplace. But they will be talking with the big shots: Abraham and Moses and David and Elijah and Peter and Paul. But I won't need him; I'll have his blessings. Horrible! Heaven will be about being what we were made to be in him. How can every redeemed person on earth be in intimate worshipful fellowship with him at the same time? I have not the faintest idea, but I am also sure that for him it will not be a problem.

What does that mean for life today? It changes our whole view of what the Christian life is about. Too easily we have come to believe that the Christian life is about a position that guarantees the believer with certain benefits. Not so! In fact, that is exactly what Isaiah has been attacking throughout his book, especially in chapters 56–66. The survivors from the Exile clearly believed that they had survived because of their special status as the elect of God. Therefore, the promises were guaranteed for them no matter what they did. As long as they did all the religious things that manifested their elect status, they were in.

The Lord responds differently. The person who knows me is the person who humbly and joyously manifests my life in his or her behavior. That will never be possible as a result of human effort or performance but only as a result of complete reliance on me. God calls us today to manifest his righteous life in our relationships. We can only do that as we live in that submissive relationship to God in which our will is utterly surrendered to the Holy Spirit so that his life can be lived through us. That is what heaven will be, and that begins now.

God has delivered us from each of our Egypts by the blood of Jesus Christ. He has done this in order to write his covenant on our hearts through the power of the Holy Spirit and thus to take up residence in the tabernacle he desires most of all—the tabernacle of our hearts. He longs to fill that tabernacle with the glory that fills the earth. He wants to move each of us from that place where we cry out in horror, "Woe to me for I am a man of unclean lips and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty" (Isa. 6:5), to the place where we can "come and see [his] glory" (66:18)—and not merely to survive the experience but actually to have that glory reside in us. That is the goal of life.

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    wreath, 317–18, 321
Y
    Yahweh, 227, 240, 241
    Yam, 273
    yoke, 177
    young people, 324, 506–7
Z
    Zagros mountains, 25, 20
    Zebulun, 160
    Zedekiah, 26, 262, 403
    Zered River, 224
    Zerubbabel, 603
    Zeus, 31, 89
    Zinzendorf, Count von, 666
    Zion, 99, 194, 219–20, 284, 290, 380–81, 393, 445, 554, 557, 564, 642–43, 656, 700
    Zionism, 361
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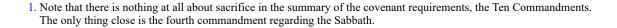
Notes

- 1. It is significant that there is almost no specific historical detail in chapters 40–66 apart from the one glaring exception, the naming of the deliverer, Cyrus. This would be consistent with the historical Isaiah having written these chapters, having a general idea what the future would hold but no specific knowledge. If those chapters were written in those actual times, then we must believe that later editors stripped the details out in order to heighten the impression that Isaiah wrote them.
- 2. There is no a priori reason why later authors could not have supplemented the work of the "master" to add these further perspectives. The only problem is that if they did do this, then they have presented their work in such a way as to try to make us believe that they did *not* do it. They have tried to make it appear as if the book is all the work of the prophet Isaiah.
- 3. See *ANET*, 278–279.
- 4. It is interesting to speculate whether the ministry of Jonah may have had anything to do with this.
- 5. These dates are those of E. H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 320. Other sources, such as J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 4th ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 2000) vary slightly.
- 6. See Merrill, Kingdom of Priests, 377.
- 7. There is a discrepancy between 2 Kings 18:1 and 2, which does not seem capable of resolution without emending the text. If Hezekiah began to reign in Hoshea's third year (v. 1), that was 729. However, verse 2 says that he was twenty-five years old when he began to reign. Since his father Ahaz was only twenty-four or twenty-five in 729, that is an impossibility. Perhaps verse 2 is referring to 516, when Ahaz died and Hezekiah assumed sole rule. For a helpful discussion of this problem and those related to it, see Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 402–5. Other scholars such as J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 278, merely assume that Hezekiah began his reign in 715. Even though it solves this problem in a different way from the one accepted here, the best treatment of the chronology of the divided kingdom remains that of E. R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).
- 8. George Gordon, Lord Byron, "The Destruction of Sennacherib," *British Poetry and Prose*, ed. P. Lieder, R. Lovett, and R. Root (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1928), 774.
- 9. Because Isaiah (along with the parallel account in 2 Kings) immediately follows the destruction of the Assyrian army with the death of Sennacherib and because of certain other issues, some (notably J. Bright) have argued that the biblical account conflates two Assyrian attacks, one in 701 and another in 687. For the most recent defense of this theory see W. Shea, "Jerusalem under Siege, Did Sennacherib Attack Twice?" *BAR* 25 (Nov.–Dec. 1999): 36–44, 64. There are no Assyrian annals known for 689–686, so the theory cannot be tested from that direction. However, the biblical account can stand on its own (see comments on Isa. 37:36–38).
- 10. It is also possible that Nebuchadnezzar's failure to administer a crushing defeat to Neco at the battle they fought on the border of Egypt in 601 may have encouraged Jehoiakim in his rebellion. See J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 327.
- 11. For this view see H. W. F. Saggs, The Greatness That Was Babylon (New York: Hawthorne, 1962), 145-52.
- 12. See Dan. 5 and note that Belshazzar offers to make Daniel third in the kingdom (5:7).
- 13. For Cyrus's report of such activity in the lands east of Babylon, see *ANET*, 316. The text of the proclamation itself is given in a shorter form in 2 Chron. 36:23 and in a longer form in Ezra 1:2–4. The Judeans are the only people we know who returned voluntarily.
- 14. In Matt. 24; Mark 13; and Luke 21 the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70 seems to be followed closely by the end of the world.
- 15. E.g., see Isa. 10–11.
- 16. Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).
- 17. J. C. Dderlein, Esaias (Altdorfi, 1775).
- 18. J. G. Eichhorn, Einleitung in das Alttestament, 3 vols. (Leipzig: Weidmanns, 1780–1787).
- 19. W. Gesenius, Philologisch-kritischer under historischer Kommentar ber der Prophet Jesaia (Leipzig: Vogel, 1821).
- 20. R. Stier, Isaias, nicht Pseudo-Isaias (Barmen: Langewiesche, 1850).
- 21. Franz Delitzsch, Kommentar ber das Buch Jesaja, 4th ed. (Leipzig: Drfflilng & Franke, 1889).
- 22. J. A. Alexander, Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah (New York: Scribners, 1846).
- 23. B. Duhm, Das Buch Jesaja (Gttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1892).
- 24. For a handy summation of this hypothetical process and a proposal for which parts of the book came from which period, see W. L. Holladay, *Isaiah: Scroll of a Prophetic Heritage* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978). For a more recent treatment along the same lines but omitting 56–66, see H. Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah's Role in Composition and Redaction* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994).
- 25. See, e.g., O. Kaiser, *Isaiah 13–39*, trans. J. Bowden (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974); and H. Wildberger, *Jesaja*, 3 vols. (HKAT; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1982).
- 26. For a more detailed critique of the theory of multiple authorship, see R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 764–78. See also the discussions in J. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*

- (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 17–29; and *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 3–12.
- 27. Notice the same characteristic in the Gospels. It is often noted that there is nothing quite like them in the Hellenistic world. Perhaps that is because the books are replicating a literary style from the pre-Hellenic world.
- 28. Y. Radday, *The Unity of Isaiah in the Light of Statistical Linguistics* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1973). For another computer study that concluded the book is a unity, see L. L. Adams and A. C. Rincher, "The Popular Critical View of the Isaiah Problem in the Light of Statistical Style Analysis," *Computer Studies* (1973): 149–57.
- 29. One of the six occurrences outside of Isaiah is in 2 Kings 19, which is a parallel to Isa. 37, so there are only five independent occurrences: three in Psalms and two in Jeremiah.
- 30. Alternatively, if we accept Williamson's hypothesis that "Deutero-Isaiah" shaped Isa. 1–39, we might think that the phrase originated with him and that he included it when he was rewriting and reorganizing the earlier material. But where does the phrase come from if not out of Isaiah's experience of the Holy One recorded in ch. 6? It originated with Isaiah, not with a hypothetical successor.
- 31. For a study of these examples see R. Margalioth, *The Indivisible Isaiah: Evidence for the Single Authorship of the Prophetic Book* (New York: Yeshiva Univ. Press, 1964).
- 32. B. Childs is one who sees the original details as having been removed to better show the unity of the book. See *Introduction to the Old Testament As Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 325–30.
- 33. See J. B. Payne, "The Eighth Century Background of Isaiah 40–66," *WTJ* 29 (1967): 179–90; 30 (1968): 50–58, 185–203
- 34. See R. Vasholz, "Isaiah Against 'the Gods': A Case for Unity," WTJ 42 (1980): 389–94.
- 35. One person who is consistent in this way is R. P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed: Cognitive Dissonance in the Prophetic Traditions of the Old Testament* (New York: Seabury, 1979). Carroll says Deutero-Isaiah was a failure, predicting things about the return from the Exile that never happened. If the words of Isa. 40–66 were not spoken in 555 B.C. but in 690 B.C., the sweeping language is much easier to understand as not being limited to the immediate future after the return from exile.
- **36**. See 1:29–30; 2:13; 6:13; 10:33–34; 29:17; 32:15, 19; 37:24; 44:14, 23; 55:12; 57:5; 60:13; 61:3.
- 37. See 2:3; 7:3; 11:16; 19:23; 35:8; 40:3; 49:9, 11; 57:10, 14; 59:7–8; 62:10.
- 38. See 5:26; 11:10–12; 13:2; 18:3; 30:17; 49:22; 62:10.
- 39. See 5:6; 6:11–12; 32:14; 34:13–17; 41:18–19; 43:20; 48:21; 50:2; 64:10.
- 40. See 29:17; 32:15; 35:1–7; 41:18–19; 51:3; 65:3, 10; 66:17.
- 41. See 1:4; 3:12; 9:6; 11:8; 26:17; 37:3; 49:19–21; 54:1–3; 66:7–12.
- 42. See 2:5; 5:20, 30; 8:22; 9:2; 26:19; 29:18; 30:26; 42:6–7, 16; 45:7; 49:9; 51:10; 58:8, 10; 59:9–10; 60:1–3, 19–20.
- 43. Adherents to a multiple-authorship theory explain this phenomenon as an example of intertextuality, assuming that later editors are consciously alluding to earlier elements in the "Isaianic tradition." See, e.g., B. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40–66* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1998).
- 44. For an extended treatment of some of these themes, see J. Oswalt, "Key Themes in the Book of Isaiah: Their Relevance for Christian Theology," in *The Newell Lectureships*, ed. T. Dwyer (Anderson, Ind.: Warner, 1996), 3:13–90, 202–11. See also "Isaiah: Theology of," in *NIDOTTE*, 4:725–32; idem, "Isaiah," in *NDBT*, 217–22.
- 45. For further discussion, see J. Oswalt, "Righteousness in Isaiah: A Study of the Function of Chapters 56–66 in the Present Structure of the Book," in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah*, ed. C. Broyles and C. Evans (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 1:177–92.
- 46. Words connoting rebellion occur some twenty times there (out of a total of thirty-one in the book as a whole). A variety of Hebrew terms are used. Among the roots used are pš; mrh, mrd, srr, and srh.
- 47. Because "the righteousness of God" is expressed in his deliverance and is often treated as a synonym of salvation (e.g., 51:5), some modern translations (e.g., RSV, NRSV) actually translate "righteousness" in Isa. 40–55 with such terms as "deliverance" or "vindication."
- 48. It is fashionable today to say that Hebrew history writing only originated in the fourth or third centuries B.C., at about the same time the Greek historians Thucydides and Herodotus were writing and for the same (basically inexplicable) reasons. However, there is no objective evidence to discount the clear claims of the Hebrew text.



- 1. Expressed succinctly in D. R. Jones, "The Tradition of the Oracles of Isaiah of Jerusalem," ZAW 69 (1955): 226-46.
- 2. For the history of this theory, see J. Alexander, The Prophecies of Isaiah (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 10.
- 3. For further discussion of date, authorship, and composition, see the introduction.





- 1. For a fuller discussion, see "Judgment and Hope" in the central-themes section of the introduction.
- 2. C. F. H. Henry, The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947).
- 3. M. Hamilton, "We're in the Money," Christianity Today 44 (June 12, 2000): 36-43.



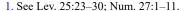
- 1. The Heb. "the word that Isaiah saw" does not require that all the following words originated with him, but it does argue that he put it into the present form.
- 2. For a fuller discussion of these issues, see Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 113–14.



- 1. The fact that there is a common theme need not preclude the unit's possibly being made up of smaller units that were originally composed separately. See most recently the discussions in B. Childs, *Isaiah* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 28–37, and C. Seitz, *Isaiah* 1–39 (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 40.
- 2. The verbs are reversed in the first two cola, and "eyes" is missing from the first colon in Isa. 2:17.
- 3. Both of the Heb. words used for arrogance here are derivatives of roots meaning "high, lofty" (gbh, rwm).
- 4. Isa. 2:6 begins with a Heb. *ki*, which may indicate a causal connection with v. 5 (cf. NASB, "walk because abandoned"), but it can also be an asseverative with the force of "indeed," as the NIV seems to construe it.
- 5. See Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 124.
- 6. See, e.g., R. E. Clements, *Isaiah 1–39* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 50.
- 7. "Women of Zion" in Isa. 3:16 and 17 is lit. "daughters of Zion," a phrase that only occurs elsewhere in 4:4 and Song 3:11. The singular "daughter of Zion" is used in Isaiah (Isa. 1:8; 10:32; 16:1; 37:22; 52:2; 62:11) as well as in Jeremiah, Lamentations, Micah, Zephaniah, and Zechariah to denote Jerusalem itself. Furthermore, the villages surrounding a city are sometimes referred to as its "daughters" (see Jer. 49:2–3, where the villages around Rabbah are called its "daughters," and then the "daughters" of Rabbah are told to weep).
- 8. See, e.g., F. Schaeffer, Escape From Reason (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1968).



- 1. So J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 65; E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 3 vols. (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1972), 1:173–75.
- 2. So Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, 59; see also Calvin.
- 3. So Childs, *Isaiah*, 35–36; Seitz, *Isaiah* 1–39, 42.
- 4. Ezekiel has the same perspective (see, e.g., Ezek. 36:27–28).
- 5. O. Chambers, My Utmost for His Highest (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1957), 245.



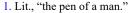
- 2. The Heb. word translated "grave" here is \$\s^\circ\$ ol (often written in English as "Sheol"), which refers to the underworld. The Old Testament does not have a fully developed view of the afterlife. It is generally not viewed as a place of reward but as a shadowy, dusty place where the spirits of the dead exist (cf. Isa. 14:9–11). See E. Merrill, "NIDOTTE, 4:6–7.
- 3. F. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1968); C. Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).
- 4. J. McDowell and B. Hostetler, Right From Wrong (Dallas: Word, 1994), 8-9.
- 5. G. Barna, Boiling Point: It Only Takes One Degree (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 2001), 42.
- 6. Donald Bloesch, "Whatever Happened To God," Christianity Today 45 (Feb. 5, 2001): 54.
- 7. It is interesting to see the regression in the depiction of the family on television from *Ozzie and Harriet* to *Leave It to Beaver* to *All in the Family* to *The Simpsons* to *Seinfeld* and *Friends*, where the family ultimately disappears. Cynicism has become the norm.
- 8. H. Frankfort, Before Philosophy (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1949), 244.
- 9. See also Mal. 3:14-4:6.



- 1. See Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 170–91 for a full discussion.
- 2. The title "the LORD Almighty" is a favorite of Isaiah's as well as several of the other prophets. Literally it is "the LORD of Armed Hosts" and denotes Yahweh as the leader of a mighty heavenly army. Thus it speaks of God's incomparable power (see 2 Kings 6:17).
- 3. The technical literary device used here is *metonymy*, where the name of one part is used to designate the whole.
- 4. The "us" in Isa. 6:8 may refer to the heavenly council (see Jer. 23:18–22). However, it is important to distinguish this from the "divine council" of the pagan religions. There all the gods and goddesses come together to make decisions. The high god may "chair the meeting," but his wishes are as often as not overruled. This is not the biblical picture. There the angels, called the "sons of God" in Job 1:6, like the seraphs here in Isaiah, exist simply to do the bidding of the One alone who can be called God.
- 5. See R. Wakely, " NIDOTTE, 3:1290.
- 6. J. B. Phillips, Your God Is Too Small (New York: Macmillan, 1962).
- 7. See J. Erskine, Millionaire for God: The Story of C. T. Studd (London: Lutterworth, 1968).
- 8. Matt. 13:14–15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; John 12:40; Acts 28:26–27.



- 1. See *ANET*, 287b.
- 2. The fact that Pekah is regularly called "the son of Remaliah" is probably a way of stressing that Pekah has usurped the throne of Israel. His father Remaliah was not king before him.
- 3. Note that both of the verbs are plural, indicating that it is not only Ahaz who is being called upon to exercise faith here. The fact that 7:13 is addressed to "the house of David" suggests that Isaiah is calling the whole royal family into judgment.
- 4. Cf. G. Gray, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Isaiah I-XXVII (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912), 133–36.
- 5. For a full discussion of these issues, see Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 209–13. On the possibility that in the first significance of the sign "Immanuel" and "Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz" are the same person, see comments on Isa. 8:1–3.
- 6. See Watts, Isaiah 1-33 (WBC 24; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1985), 98.
- 7. If this suggestion is correct, Isaiah would be a widower at this point, the mother of Shear-Jashub having died.
- 8. Cf. Gen. 2:17; Deut. 1:39; Isa. 5:20.
- 9. Staffan Linder, The Harried Leisure Class (New York: Columbia, 1970).



- 2. If the supposition is correct that Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz is the initial fulfillment of the Immanuel sign, then the "young woman of marriageable age" mentioned in 7:14 (see comments on 7:10–25) is not yet married to Isaiah and is not the mother of Shear-Jashub (7:3). Perhaps that child's mother has died. See Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 219–23, and references there
- 3. This is the meaning of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (see NIV text note).
- 4. Note the tendency to lose control of the bladder and bowels in the presence of sudden terror.
- 5. This model has perhaps been best expressed in modern times by Robert Coleman in his classic *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1956). See also Allan Coppedge, *The Biblical Principles of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989).
- Rudyard Kipling, "Recessional," British Poetry and Prose, ed. P Lieder, R. Lovett, and R. Root (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1928), 1341.
- 7. Mal. 1:2–3 is not talking about the eternal destinies of the individuals Jacob and Esau. The prophet is speaking of God's differing responses to the nations of Israel and Edom.
- 8. Desmond Morris, *The Naked Ape* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1967).



- 1. For further discussion on the connection of this sign to Immanuel, see Young, *Isaiah*, *1–18*, 329–31.
- 2. See Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 102–5, for a discussion of the titles.
- 3. Although Childs (*Isaiah*, 80–81) grants that the passage may have had some other historical referent originally, he insists that in its present setting it must be understood in a messianic way.
- 4. The English word "peace" only partially reflects the meaning of *alom*. The word involves putting back together what had been divided. Thus it speaks of much more than merely the absence of hostilities. See Philip J. Nel, "NIDOTTE, 4:130–35.
- 5. I do not mean that he committed sin; the New Testament is very clear he did not (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15). But it is equally clear that he experienced what it is to have sinned, not objectively but subjectively (Isa. 53:6; Mark 15:33).
- 6. While it is tempting to relate Christ's death to "the land of the shadow of death" (Isa. 9:2), there seems to be little direct explicit connotation of death in the Heb. word *almawet* (see the NIV note "or *land of darkness*"; see also James D. Price, "
 NIDOTTE, 3:809).



1. Critics have sought to show that Isa. 9:8–10:4 and some part of chapter 5 were originally part of the same poem, but as Motyer cogently points out, there has been no agreement among the host of proposals that have been made (*Prophecy of Isaiah*, 112). It is best simply to allow an artist to use a favorite theme in different ways and different places.



- 1. The verb *np* has the sense of "to profane" or "to pervert" (see, e.g., Num. 35:33; Isa. 24:5), thus "godless" may not be the best rendering for the noun. The KJV rendering of "hypocrite" or "hypocritical" (based on one way the LXX translates the noun) may be appropriate in some cases. In others, such as here, "perverse" might be better. See R. E. Averbeck, "

 ¬¬¬¬, "NIDOTTE, 2:206–9.
- 2. See Isa. 9:4 and 10:24 for the same word pair for "club" and "rod."
- 3. Note yet another reference to a "child" in this section (7:1–12:6) in 10:19.
- 4. See R. Hiers, "Day of the Lord," ABD, 2:82-83.

- 5. For a study of the remnant, see G. Hasel, *The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah*, 2d ed. (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews Univ. Press, 1975).
- 6. ANET, 285b
- 7. The LXX has "broken from off your shoulder"; the Targum, "the nations will be destroyed before the Messiah"; the Syriac, "broken because of your strength."
- 8. See J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 286–88, 298–309; W. Shea, "Jerusalem Under Siege: Did Sennacherib Attack Twice?" *BAR* 25/6 (Nov.–Dec. 1999): 36–44, 64; M. Cogan, "Sennacherib's Siege of Jerusalem: Once or Twice?" *BAR* 27/1 (Jan.–Feb. 2001): 40–45, 69.
- 9. So also Childs, Isaiah; Motyer, Prophecy of Isaiah.
- 10. The use of this particular imagery suggests another conscious play on Assyria's boasting. Their kings were fond of saying how they had cut down the forests of Lebanon, both to make a path for their armies and to decorate their palaces. Now they themselves will be cut down. See also Ezek. 31, where an entire chapter is given to the metaphor of Assyria as a great cedar in Lebanon.
- 11. The term *Holocaust* is an English transliteration of the Hebrew term usually translated "whole burnt offering." Jews today see themselves as having been sacrificed for the sins of the world.



- 1. So Motyer, Prophecy of Isaiah, 121.
- 2. So Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, 171; see also Childs, *Isaiah*, 102.
- 3. Heb. *hoter* ("shoot") occurs only here and in Prov. 14:3, while *neṣer* ("branch") only occurs here and in Isa. 14:19; 60:21; Dan. 11:7. Neither term has a particularly messianic connection.
- 4. "Righteousness" (sedeq) is right behavior, implying absolute standards by which such behavior can be judged.
- 5. "Justice" (lit., "with uprightness"; Heb. *mišor*, from the root *yšr*), that is, "in an upright, straight way." In the Hebrew mind, justice is more than legal equity; it is that divine order by which all things are rightly governed.
- 6. Note also Isa. 53:11, which says that the "knowledge" of the Suffering Servant "will justify many."
- 7. Cf. the Assyrian king boasting that his hand has reached into the "nests" of the nations to gather up all their wealth (10:13–14).
- 8. So Young, The Book of Isaiah, 1:395–96; Motyer, Prophecy of Isaiah, 125–26.
- 9. See also Isa. 19:23; 35:8; 40:3; 62:10, all of which are in the context of redemption and restoration.
- 10. This is the thesis of O. Cullmann in his *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, trans. F. Filson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964).



- 1. For an involved suggestion concerning the arrangement, see Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 131–34.
- 2. Childs, *Isaiah*, 124, simply dismisses the claim of authorship by saying it indicates "a redactional strategy." This does not answer the questions of authenticity and integrity raised by the statement.
- 3. On this point, see S. Erlandsson, *The Burden of Babylon: A Study of Isaiah 13:2–14:23* (Lund: Gleerup, 1970). Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 131–32, admits this as a possibility but says the material was later "enriched."
- 4. Note that the "oracle" against Assyria (Isa. 14:24–27) is contained within this one, with no special introductory rubric of its own. This suggests again that "Babylon" here represents all the ancient Mesopotamian cultures.
- 5. See also 13:5, 9, which the NIV translates "the whole country" and "the land." In both cases, and especially the latter, I believe "earth" would be a better translation.
- 6. Lit., "Yahweh of hosts."
- 7. Heb. šadday.
- 8. A part of Kipling's "Recessional."

- 1. See also Ezek. 32, where the arrival of the pharaoh in hell has a number of similarities to this passage.
- 2. For a discussion of this term in its Old Testament context, see Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 318 n. 15.
- 3. For a concise review of the claims, see Childs, *Isaiah*, 126. See also Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 321–22.
- 4. In Canaanite mythology the king of the gods is called *El*, which is the word translated "God" in Isa. 14:13; the word *Elyon*, translated "Most High" in v. 14, is often added to the name of the god Baal in that same mythology.
- 5. A. L. Oppenheim, Ancient Mesopotamia (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964), 169.
- 6. "Rejected branch" (v. 19) is lit. "abominable branch," which must be a figure of speech. Two of the ancient versions translate it with "miscarriage."
- 7. So Childs, Seitz, and others.
- 8. On the plan of God, see also 19:12; 22:11; 23:8–9; 25:1; 37:26; 46:10–11; 48:14; 55:11.
- 9. P. Shelley, "Ozymandias," *British Poetry and Prose*, ed. P. Lieder, R. Lovett, and R. Root (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1928), 813.
- 10. The ignominious death of Hitler, in particular, shows some startling parallels to Isa. 14:16–20a.
- 11. W. Henley, "Invictus," *The Best Loved Poems of the American People*, ed. H. Felleman (Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City Books, 1936), 73.



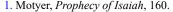
1. 2 Kings 18:1, 9–10 place the beginning of Hezekiah's reign in 727 B.C. before the fall of the northern kingdom. Yet v. 13 says that Sennacherib's attack, which can be dated securely in 701 B.C., occurred in Hezekiah's fourteenth year. Perhaps there was a coregency with his father Ahaz until 716, but elsewhere in Kings the first year of a coregency is counted as the king's first year of rule, meaning that we would expect 18:13 to say that Sennacherib's attack occurred in Hezekiah's twenty-sixth year. For a full discussion of the problems, see E. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 132–40.



- 1. See B. Jones, *Howling over Moab: Irony and Rhetoric in Isaiah 15–16* (SBLDS 157; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), for an alternate interpretation. Jones feels that the weeping here is ironic, just like the lament in Isa. 14.
- 2. Note that there is no such empathy in the announcement of judgment on Moab in 25:10–12, so if this interpretation is correct, these feelings are by no means unchanging.
- 3. Probably Kir Hareseth (see 16:7, 11).
- 4. The Heb. words here are *hesed*, and *'emet*, words with rich theological content stressing the undeserved nature of the love involved and the absolute stability of God's promises.
- 5. The Heb. words are *mišpaṭ* and *ṣedeq*, which have the connotations of true order and right activity.



- 1. The Heb. word is mas's'a', lit., "burden."
- 2. Childs (*Isaiah*, 135–36) says that M. Sweeney (*Isaiah 1–39* [FOTL 16; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 252–65) has "finally made sense" of chapters 17 and 18, but neither he nor Sweeney really succeed in explaining the unity of thought in the passage. In my judgment Motyer (*Prophecy of Isaiah*, 155–63) is much more successful at explaining how the various ideas fit together.
- 3. "Asherah poles" apparently refer to groves of poplar trees that were dedicated to the worship of the Canaanite fertility goddess. Recent archaeological discoveries have shown that some apostate forms of the worship of Yahweh saw her as his consort
- 4. This is a frequent theme in the book (see 2:8; 40:19; 44:9–11).



- 2. For the most current thinking on this period on Egyptian history, see I. Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), 352–68.
- 3. Note that Piankhy ruled Upper (southern) Egypt and all of Nubia.
- 4. "The land of whirring wings" apparently refers to the many insects found in the swampy areas along the upper Nile.



- 1. For further discussion on this point in this context, see Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 366–86.
- 2. See the discussion of *yom* in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. E Jenni and C. Westermann, trans. M. Biddle (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997), 2:526–39. The phrase actually occurs a second time within each of the third and the fourth statements (Isa. 19:21, 24), so that there are no less than six occurrences in these ten verses.
- 3. The significance of the number five is unclear. Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 168, notes that the number is used in 17:6 and 30:17 to express the idea of "a few." H. Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27: A Continental Commentary*, trans. T. Trappe (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 270–71, has a detailed discussion of the possibilities and concludes that the author wrote during the postexilic period and knew of five specific cities where there was a significant Jewish presence. But the text is not speaking of Jewish communities in Egyptian cities.
- 4. Most editions of the Masoretic Text reads "ir haheres ("city of destruction"), but a few Hebrew MSS, 1QIsa^a, and some other versions read "ir haheres ("City of the Sun"), that is, Heliopolis (see NIV text note). It is easy to see how an error in copying could have occurred.
- 5. Here the theme "highway" occurs once again (cf. 11:16; 33:8; 35:8; 40:3; 49:11; 62:10). As a theme it expresses the removal of separation and alienation. There was a great highway connecting Assyria and Egypt, but this is speaking of reconciliation and not heavy construction.
- 6. The events described here took place between 714 and 711 B.C. The Egyptians had persuaded the people of Ashdod to revolt against the Assyrians. But the Assyrians recaptured the city, and when the king fled to Egypt for asylum, the Egyptians gave him up to the Assyrians. For a fuller discussion of this incident, see Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 382–84.
- 7. B. Pascal, Pascal's Penses, trans. W. Trotter (New York: Dutton, 1958), 113.
- 8. More will be said on this in the comments on chs. 41–45.



- 1. Scholars as diverse as Delitzsch, *Commentary on Isaiah*, trans. J. Denney, 3d ed., 2 vols. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, n.d.), 343–44, and Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 157–59, have taken this position. Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 171–72, also includes ch. 23, primarily for reasons of atmosphere.
- 2. Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 1–39, 388–90.
- 3. It is also possible that *yam* ("sea") is a corruption or an original masc. pl. ending on "desert." The word is missing from the LXX (though it is present in both the Vulgate and the Syriac).
- 4. The situation is further confused because the LXX reads "Idumea" (Edom) in the title. Some see "Dumah" as simply an anagram of Edom, but why that would be done is unclear. See Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27*, 328–29, 331–37 for an exhaustive discussion of the issue.



- 1. This understanding of vv. 2–7 represents a change from the position taken in Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 410, where I proposed the material all related to the recent past.
- 2. The LXX makes it plural like all the rest.

- 3. See S. Layton, "The Steward in Ancient Israel: A Study of the Hebrew ('ašer) 'al-habbayit in Its Near Eastern Setting," JBL 109 (1990): 633–49.
- 4. See also Prov. 10:4; 12:11, 24, 27; 14:1, 23; 15:22; 18:9; 19:15; 20:4, 18; 21:5; 22:29; 24:3–4; 31:12–29.
- 5. See also Prov. 16:1; 19:21; 21:2.
- 6. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 10.



- 1. See H. Katzenstein and D. Edwards, "Tyre," ABD, 6:686–92.
- 2. These ships are also referred to in 1 Kings 10:22; 22:48; Ps. 48:7; Isa. 2:16; 60:9; Ezek. 27:25; Jonah 1:3. They may have originally been ore-carriers (Semitic *ršš* means "to melt"), but ultimately the name came to be used for any large trading ship.
- 3. The meaning of the Heb. of v. 10 is uncertain. A lit. translation would be: "Go over your land like the Nile, daughter of Tarshish, there is no more strength." The NIV reading is based on the LXX. The meaning may be that with Tyre's constraint gone, the colonies can do what they like (see Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 191).
- 4. See 5:26; 9:11; 10:6; 14:26; 19:12; 37:26; 41:2; 45:1; 46:10–11.
- 5. See. 2:11, 17; 4:2; 5:15–16; 13:19; 14:12–20; 28:1–6; 60:15.
- 6. Notice that the king of Tyre is described in similar language in Ezek. 28:1–19, also similar to that used to describe the king of Babylon in Isa. 14.
- 7. Childs, Isaiah, 168-69.
- 8. Motyer (*Prophecy of Isaiah*, 193) believes it refers to the period between Sennacherib and the rise of Nebuchadnezzar. See Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 435–36, for some other options.
- 9. J. Wesley, The Standard Sermons of John Wesley (London: Epworth, 1964), 2:326.
- 10. Ibid., 325



- 1. See J. Oswalt, "Recent Studies in Old Testament Apocalyptic," in *The Face of Old Testament Studies*, ed. D. Baker and B. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 369–90.
- 2. There is no agreement among critical scholars as to the date, authorship, or composition of these chapters. For an exhaustive treatment of the issues, see Wildberger, *Isaiah* 13–27, 439–67. See also Oswalt, *Isaiah* 1–39, 441–43.
- 3. Seitz is representative of a number of scholars who, while not believing that the same writer is responsible for chs. 13–23 and chs. 24–27, still see the materials as having been intentionally put in sequence by a later editor (*Isaiah 1–39*, 172–75). Motyer has developed an intricate chiastic structure uniting chs. 24–27, but it is perhaps a bit too intricate (*Prophecy of Isaiah*, 194–95).
- 4. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, 320–21, contends that Heb. '*eres* should be translated "land" throughout, taking the chapter to refer to the destruction of Israel by Assyrian armies. But apart from his idiosyncratic understanding of the way this segment is structured, one would not naturally think of such a rendering here.
- 5. Like 14:4–21, this chapter is a fine example of Hebrew poetry. It is esp. noteworthy for the alliteration and assonance that characterize it.
- 6. So, e.g., Seitz, Isaiah 1–39, 174–75.
- 7. This is similar to the position taken by D. Johnson, *From Chaos to Restoration: An Integrative Reading of Isaiah 24*–27 (JSOTSup 61; Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1988). Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 202, argues against this position by saying that unlike 22:4, where the prophet refused to partake in false revelry, this is true praise that he can only affirm. I do not believe this is the issue. Rather, it is the point already noted: a refusal to let future joy obscure present reality.
- 8. For more of this argument, see C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (Macmillan: New York, 1947).
- 9. William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality."
- 10. The NIV, in a worthy attempt to give *sarx* when used in this way some meaning for the modern reader, often translates it as "the sinful nature" (cf. Rom. 8:5). I am afraid this often obscures the sense as much as reveals it, but there are not many good alternatives.

- 1. In many ways, these two terms *poor* and *needy* are the antithesis of *arrogant* and *self-sufficient*. Thus, they speak at least as much about attitudes of humility and dependency as they do about financial or material want. See also Isa. 11:4; 14:30; 32:7; 41:17; cf. Ps. 40:17; 109:22; Matt. 5:3.
- 2. The Heb. word here is *qwh*, lit., "to wait." But this waiting in not merely a marking of time. Rather, it is a refusal to rush ahead with one's own solution to the problems at hand and a confident expectation that God will solve the problem in his own way and in his own time. See Jenni and Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 3:1126–32.
- 3. See Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27*, 455, 538–41. He believes that Isa. 25:9–10a speaks exclusively of Israel's salvation and that a later person, who had been somehow deeply hurt by Moab, decided to insert 25:10b–12 specifically to show the difference between Zion and Moab. See also Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, 334–35, who believes this section is being held up as a specimen of the littleness of Jerusalem as opposed to God's attention to the "weighty matters."
- 4. Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 191–92, expresses these ideas eloquently.
- 5. For somewhat similar imagery, see Mal. 2:3, where God says he will spread the manure of their sacrifices on the faces of the corrupt priests. See also Phil. 3:8, where Paul calls all his former, proud achievements manure (NIV "rubbish").
- 6. Another possibility is "in his place."
- 7. NIV "cleverness." Another possibility is "struggles."
- 8. It is perhaps significant that in the oracles against the nations "pride" is specifically attributed to Moab (Isa. 16:6). This fact may have prompted its use here.
- 9. Note the irony here. There is no individual worth, but my individual existence is all I have and every scrap of my energy must be devoted to that. Thus, paganism knows nothing of individual self-sacrifice for the community good, something that the biblical doctrine of individual resurrection makes possible.



- 1. While there is broad scholarly support for this division, there is almost no agreement on the details. See Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 469–70, n. 9. Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 212, offers an intricate four-part chiastic structure. But the parallel structure seems to break down in the center sections. Isa. 27:1 is included with 26:20–21 because its content agrees more closely with those verses than it does with 27:2–11. See the discussion below.
- 2. Lit., "the desire of the nepeš [self]" (NIV, "desire of our hearts").
- 3. But cf. 54:4-5, where Isaiah asserts that even these can have a "name" if they will choose to keep God's covenant.
- 4. See the discussion in Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 483–84, n. 42. I prefer to read the verse "O LORD, in distress they were constrained by you; in straits, they were humbled by your discipline upon them."
- 5. The correctness of this observation depends on how the Heb. of the final colon is translated. The lit. reading is, "Nor have the inhabitants of earth fallen." The NIV, in view of the context, takes this to be a reference to the "dropping" (birthing) of a baby. If so, this is the only place in the Old Testament where the phrase is used in this way. Usually, the connotation is to "fall" in battle. The NRSV and REB both support the idea of birth.
- 6. The lit. Heb. is, "The earth will cause the slack ones to fall." As in my comments on Isa. 26:18, it is not certain that "fall" in these two places connotes birth (as per NIV). The earth has been holding these people captive, so it may be that the idea is that the earth will let them drop from its jaws (see v. 21).
- 7. The reference to "dew" in connection with light ("morning") and "earth" suggests the possibility that Isaiah is consciously making use of some of the language of Canaanite myth. In certain of those myths dew and earth are two maidens who appear with a third, who is a daughter of light. See comments on 27:1 for further discussion of this reuse of mythical language.
- 8. For a fuller discussion, see Oswalt, *Isaiah* 1-39, 490–91, and the notes there.
- 9. Timothy LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Left Behind* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale, 1995). To date no less than eight subsequent books have appeared in the series, each of them an instant bestseller on national lists.



1. The entire chapter is written from a postexilic perspective. For many, this proves that the material could not have been written before that time. However, if we grant any possibility of genuine predictive prophecy, that need not be the case.

The prophet is making a case in the 700s B.C. for the trustworthiness of God. A necessary part of that argument is that when Israel has brought disaster on itself by its refusal to trust, God will prove just how trustworthy he is by his gracious deliverance of them.

- "Asherah poles" were perhaps poplar groves surrounding the altar to Asherah, a Canaanite fertility goddess. They appear to have been symbols of the goddess.
- 3. So among recent commentators, Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 224–25; Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 198–200; Childs, *Isaiah*, 198. But Seitz and Childs arrive at radically differing interpretations: to Seitz, the passage demonstrates that the pagan worship of the world can be atoned for; to Childs, it demonstrates that there is no universal salvation in the Old Testament.
- 4. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, 349–50, is an example of this position among recent commentators.
- 5. A third alternative is espoused by Wildberger, Isaiah 13–27, that the reference is to Samaria, noted for its idolatry.
- 6. The historical southern border of the Promised Land (Josh. 15:47), approximately where the southern border of Israel is today.



- 1. Motyer, Prophecy of Isaiah, 229-30.
- 2. The meaning of the Heb. is a matter of debate. It is *aw laaw, aw laaw, qaw laqaw, qaw laqaw*. Some of the suggestions are that they are a meaningless babble, part of a device to teach the Heb. alphabet, or baby talk used by parents when teaching a child to walk. The NIV is based on the idea that *aw* is a shortened form of *miwah*, "commandment," and *qaw* is the word for "measuring line" or rule (see v. 17). See Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 512, n. 36, for a fuller discussion of the alternatives.
- 3. See Prov. 1:22; 29:8. See also "mockers" in Ps. 1:1; Prov. 21:24; 22:10; Isa. 29:20.
- 4. It is also possible that this refers to the Canaanite god Mot, "Death," suggesting that the leaders have entered into some sort of a contract with Death to protect them from his scourge.
- 5. The prophet may also be alluding to the importance of Osiris, the underworld deity, in Egyptian religion.
- 6. Note that the embassy from Hezekiah asked the Assyrian representative to make his demand for surrender in Aramaic (36:11), but the speaker insisted on using Hebrew so the common people could understand the threat.
- 7. See K. Rudolf, "Gnosticism," ABD, 2:1033-40.



- 1. See, e.g., Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, 236–37.
- 2. Childs, *Isaiah*, 215–17, appears to argue for the unity of the material, but he does not make it clear exactly how or when it received this unified form. Presumably, since he accepts the scholarly consensus of a long editorial process that brought the book to its present form, there were preexisting pieces of material that have now been combined into a "unity." If that is his position, I do not believe his attempt to save the literary unity of this passage, or of the book as a whole, succeeds. If the final form of the text results in a different intent from that of the original author(s), then we must bear both those differing intents in mind when we interpret the material.



1. The Heb. word is 'araş, "to be in dread of, be terrified," a stronger word than the typical yara', "to fear."



- 1. The Heb. root is *srr*, "to be stubborn." It occurs also in 1:23, "your rulers are rebels," and in 65:2, "an obstinate people." This distribution is significant since there are only seventeen occurrences of the word in the Old Testament.
- 2. It is not clear whether the officials and envoys are Judean who have gone to Egypt or Egyptians. If the former, then the people are saying, "See, the Egyptians have received us everywhere from north to south." If the latter, then perhaps the

- new Nubian dynasty has succeeded in establishing its hegemony of the entire land of Egypt, both delta and river valley. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 2:338–39, seems to take the officials as Egyptians and the envoys as Judeans.
- 3. This is, of course, exactly what Ahaz did with Assyria, paying them a large amount of money for their "help" (2 Kings 16:7–9). It is significant that Hezekiah is not accused of doing the same thing his father did here. Perhaps this alliance is made with Egypt against his will. Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 215–17, discusses the issues carefully but does not really resolve them.
- 4. There are three Heb. words in the phrase. Lit. translated, they read "Rahab are they—sitting." If the second and third words are combined into one, the translation would be "Rahab the one who sits" (cf. *BHS*).
- 5. See also Seitz, Isaiah 1–39, 219.
- 6. While there is no question that Isa. 30:18 is a transitional statement, I believe it is better seen as a conclusion to 30:8–17 than an introduction to 30:19–26. In part, this is because of the two occurrences of "therefore" (NIV "yet," "for") in this verse, which clearly signal a conclusion. It is because Israel has refused to wait and must undergo destruction that God must wait to be gracious to his people.
- 7. While *moreyka* may be "your teachers," as per NIV, the form may also be a singular, as per NRSV. The idea that it is God who is this teacher seems to fit the context best. See also Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 250.
- 8. "Topheth" was probably located in the Hinnom Valley south and west of Jerusalem. It is referred to as the place where children were burned in sacrifice to the Ammonite god Molech (2 Kings 23:10; Jer. 7:31–32; 19:6, 11–14; see also Ezek. 23:37–39).
- 9. See also Isa. 11:4; Job 4:9; Ps. 18:8; Ezek. 21:31; 2 Thess. 2:8; Rev. 19:15.
- 10. Isa. 4:6; 16:3; 25:4; 32:2; 49:2; 51:16.
- 11. See J. A. Thompson and Elmer A. Marten, "NIDOTTE, 4:55–59.
- 12. See E. Wrthwein, "μετανοέω μετάνοια," TDNT, 4:975–89.



- 1. Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 253–54, analyzes the material in this way.
- 2. The thirteen uses of the phrase "the Holy One of Israel" in chs. 1–39 (including the one "Holy One of Jacob" in 29:23) tend to emphasize God's transcendent power and glory. Thus, to trust in flesh and blood, as here, instead of him is complete nonsense.
- 3. See 5:25; 9:12, 17, 21; 10:4; 14:26, 27; 23:11.
- 4. Young, The Book of Isaiah, 2:377-78.
- 5. A part of Solomon's income was as an arms dealer, purchasing horses from Asia Minor and chariots from Egypt and selling the resulting units to the neighboring countries (1 Kings 10:28–29).
- 6. From Kipling's "Recessional."



- 1. From a literary perspective, Isa. 31 and 32 may go together as a single "woe" unit. From a thematic perspective, chs. 32 and 33 go together as discussing the true leader.
- 2. See Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 579–80, for an extended discussion; see also Childs, *Isaiah*, 239–40. Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 230–33, argues at some length that the reference is to Hezekiah, but there is no biblical evidence to show that the years after the deliverance in 701 B.C. brought about the kind of situation predicted here.
- 3. See Chou-Wee Pan, "NIDOTTE, 3:11–13.
- 4. See E. Carpenter and M. A. Grisanti, "NIDOTTE, 3:31–32.



1. Childs, *Isaiah*, 237–42; Seitz, *Isaiah* 1–39, 229. Childs addresses the issues more directly, but I cannot help but feel he sidesteps the central issue to a certain extent. He seems to accept the scholarly explanation of the growth of the material

- but then dismisses that supposed growth as irrelevant to the message of the present unit. I do not believe authorial intent can be so easily avoided.
- 2. This is not to insist that they have to have been first written or spoken together. They may have been originally separate. But if they were, they both come from the same mind, as the use of ša' annot, a rare word outside of Isaiah, in both parts indicates. Thus, as the larger composition began to emerge in the prophet's mind and heart, it was easy for him to combine pieces like these in order to make his larger point. This is different from supposing multiple editorial levels in which pieces from many different origins and settings are combined on almost mechanical principles.
- 3. "Secure" here is a fem. participle of bt, "trust" (so also in Isa. 32:10, 11).
- 4. See also 7:23-25; 9:18; 10:17.
- 5. The word translated "rest" here is ša' anannot, the same word rendered "complacent" in Isa. 32:9 and 11. In those places the women were resting on the wrong things.
- 6. Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33. Note that only in John is the Baptist quoted as referring to the sacrificial death of the Messiah. Clearly John saw beyond the means (cleansing and forgiveness) to the ultimate goal, namely, Spiritfilling.



- 1. Many scholars today separate Isa. 33 from chs. 28–32 because of its supposed liturgical and apocalyptic flavor. See H. Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 221–39, for a review of recent positions and a lengthy argument that the chapter was originally designed by "Deutero-Isaiah" as a bridge from his collection of earlier prophetic writings to his own. This view is highly theoretical and, in my mind, does not adequately account for the present location of Isa. 34–39. Childs, *Isaiah*, 245–46, 249, speaks favorably of W. Beuken's attempt to show that ch. 33 is an example of intertextuality, in which an editor has reused earlier references in order to pull those earlier materials together ("Jesaja 33 als Spiegeltext im Jesajabuch," *ETL* 67 [1991]: 5–35). But Childs says this has not broken the essential narrative structure within which the material functions. In that case it seems difficult to me to distinguish author from editor.
- 2. See 2 Kings 18:13–16; cf. Smith, *Isaiah 1–39*, 2 vols., rev. ed. (Expositor's Bible; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1927), 331–32.
- 3. In this respect Rudolph Otto, in his *The Idea of the Holy*, 2d ed. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1950), has done us a grave disservice. He has excluded the biblical idea from his primary research and has used pagan religions where the concept is marginal at best to form the foundation for thinking about the biblical idea. For a better understanding, see J. Wells, *God's Holy People: A Theme in Biblical Theology* (JSOTSup 305; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000). See also J. Oswalt, *Called to Be Holy* (Nappanee, Ind.: Evangel, 1999).



- 1. This is the unusual word $\S a^n nan$, which appeared three times in Isa. 32, one other time in Isaiah, and only five other times in the rest of the Old Testament.
- 2. An alternative is that the reference is to the present condition of Israel that can only be rectified by the Messiah (see Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 605).
- 3. Thus Seitz, *Isaiah* 1-39, 229, argues that the intended reference must be to Hezekiah.
- 4. Note the same problem in Mal. 3:1. The "messenger of the covenant" will come, but then it is said that the Lord himself is the Coming One. Which is it, the messenger of the Lord or the Lord himself? The answer, of course, is that it is both.



- 1. It is becoming popular among scholars to see Isa. 34–35 as a bridge between chs. 1–33 and chs. 40–66. See Childs, *Isaiah*, 252–56 for a handy summary of the arguments. I believe that creates some insuperable problems for the placement of chs. 36–39.
- 2. Throughout the book "the host of heaven" refers not only to the physical stars but also to the pantheon of pagan gods. Thus, the statement here that "the starry host will fall" has theological significance as well as cosmic.
- 3. See Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 268–69 for a helpful review of this evidence.

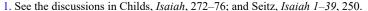
- 4. The Heb. of Isa. 34:12 is difficult. Lit. it reads: "Its nobles and there is nothing there, a kingdom it will be called. And all its princes will come to an end." The proposal of *BHS* to take "nobles" from the beginning of this verse and add it to the end of the previous on the basis of LXX is not warranted by the LXX. The NIV makes as good a sense as any. For some other proposals, see Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 616, n. 14.
- 5. It is not clear what this "scroll" is. Some scholars suggest it is a previous prophecy of Isaiah, but there is no such prophecy extant. Others suggest that a postexilic editor is referring to the previous passage and noting that the prophecy has been fulfilled in the destruction of Edom and its large-scale abandonment afterward. But the text cannot be used to authenticate the text. Most likely this is a rhetorical reference to the hypothetical Book of the Lord (see Mal. 3:16), where everything is written. Thus, the writer is simply saying, "You can believe this; it is as certain as the laws of nature."



- 1. Since this is poetry, it is unwise to try to find a precise literal referent for the images used here. In other words, we should not ask what literal desert is being referred to, nor should we attempt to narrow down to one option the place from which the people are returning. It seems to me that the author intends to talk about several things simultaneously: the return from exile in 539 B.C. and later, the ultimate ingathering of all believers at the end of time, and the journey of the unbeliever to faith, restoration, and healing. On the correct reading of biblical poetry, see R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 186.
- 2. For other occurrences of "highway" in Isaiah, see Isa. 11:16; 19:23; 40:3; 43:19; 49:11; 62:10. In each case it is either to provide a way for people to come to God or for God to come to his people.
- 3. *wil, a morally perverse person, cf. Isa. 19:11 (not the same word used in 32:5–6).



- 1. Many commentators speak of chs. 36–39 as a historical appendix. In part this is true because the material closely parallels parts of the Hezekiah section in 2 Kings. Thus, Bernard Duhm has posited that the material was simply lifted more or less as is from Kings by a postexilic editor. Supposedly the editor did this because he needed a bridge between the two blocks of material he wanted to put together: chs. 1–35 (First Isaiah) and chs. 40–55 (Second Isaiah). Modern redaction criticism takes a much less mechanical view than this, and many scholars today who accept multiple authorship for the book would still argue that the material has been edited to serve a particular function in the present form of the book. There are basically three views on the relationship of the material here and in Kings: priority of Kings (cf. Childs, *Isaiah*, 260–66), priority of Isaiah (cf. Seitz, *Isaiah* 1–39, 243–44), and both dependent on a common source (cf. Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 285–86). In my view, the present order of the incident narrated in chs. 36–39 of Isaiah (as Motyer recognizes).
- 2. Aside from the fact that there is a question as to whether Merodach-Baladan was still active in 701 B.C., the promise in 38:6 that God will deliver the city from the Assyrian king means that Hezekiah's illness and the visit of the Babylonian envoys occurred at least somewhat prior to the destruction of the Assyrian army described in 37:36–38. See Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 629–30, for further discussion.
- 3. For a full discussion, see E. R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, 3d ed., 118–54. Young (*The Book of Isaiah*, 2:540–42) argues cogently that "fourteen" is an error for "twenty-four."
- 4. Note that although Shebna is still in the king's "cabinet" as secretary, he has been deposed as Isaiah prophesied and Eliakim has been put in his place as "palace administrator" or prime minister (cf. 22:20–21).
- 5. See *ANET*, 287–88.
- 6. The NIV has "the people remained silent," but the Heb. does not specify the subject of the verb. It seems more likely that it is the embassy, since it is hard to believe that everyone listening on the wall would have done something the king commanded just because he commanded it.
- 7. Heb. na'ar, "lad."
- 8. It is interesting that Isaiah does not foretell the destruction of the Assyrian army, nor does he give any hint as to what the "certain report" (37:7) will contain. This leads some scholars to maintain that the account of the destruction of the army is a later legend (see below on 37:36–38). Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 279, maintains that the army's destruction was already predicted in 14:24–27 and that here the focus is on what will happen to Sennacherib for his blasphemy. The latter point is certainly correct whether or not we agree with that interpretation of 14:24–27.
- 9. Lit., "a perfect [unblemished] heart."
- 10. Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26–29; 3:5, 12, 21.
- 11. O. Chambers, My Utmost for His Highest (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1935), 151.



- 2. Motyer, Prophecy of Isaiah, 280-81.
- 3. It has been suggested that the huge reliefs of the fall of Lachish in Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh represent something of a consolation prize. Surely the Assyrian would have rather had depictions of the fall of Jerusalem.
- 4. It is often pointed out that Tirhakah was not actually "king" of Egypt in 701 B.C. He did not assume this position until several years later. However, since the final edition of the chapter was not written until after Sennacherib's death in 681, it is probable that Tirhakah is given the title here that the writer knew he eventually held. This was a common practice in ancient literature. Cf. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 2:478–79.
- 5. This phrase, which appears some thirty times in the Bible, usually appears in contexts that at least imply a contrast with idols. Cf. Deut. 5:26; 1 Sam. 17:26; Jer. 10:10; Dan. 6:20, 26; Acts 14:15.
- 6. For a discussion of the authenticity of the statement as coming from "Isaiah son of Amoz," see Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 658–59.
- 7. In Ezek. 29:4 "hook" seems to denote a fishhook. But in Ezek. 19:4 and 38:4 the idea seems to be more of a ring in the nose, as is suggested here by the parallelism with "bit."
- 8. See Delitzsch, Commentary on Isaiah, 2:30.
- 9. See Dan. 5:30 for a similar kind of statement. After the lengthy pronouncement of judgment on Belshazzar in vv. 1–29, the actual event is reported in one verse.
- 10. Cf. Isa. 14:21. See also 10:15-19, 28-34.
- 11. In his annals, Sennacherib boasts that he forced Hezekiah to give back the loyal king of the Philistines whom Hezekiah had been holding captive in Jerusalem, and he says he exacted heavy tribute from him and "shut him up like a bird in a cage." But that is the end of the report of that campaign. In the next nineteen years he does not report campaigning in the west again. The Bible explains why he did not capture and execute the rebel Hezekiah and why he did not pursue the capture of Egypt any further (cf. ANET, 288).
- 12. It is common today to assert that Isa. 37:36–37 are a legendary explanation of what was just an accident of history (cf. R. Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, 288–89). Childs, *Isaiah*, 276–78, is to be commended for attempting to save the theological value of the text, insisting that although the event did not occur, this account is still a "true" witness to God's activity in history. However, we must ask how the assertion of a historical fiction supports theological "truth." Paul's statement in 1 Cor. 15:17, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile," expresses the connection between historical fact and faith that the Bible makes from beginning to end. Note that a "legendary" explanation of Sennacherib's death is not supplied. If the destruction of the army is legendary, one might expect the king's death to have been given the same treatment.
- 13. Y. Kaufmann, The Religion of Israel, trans. M. Greenberg (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1960), 21, 29.
- 14. Ibid., 146, etc.
- 15. D. Luckenbill, ed., Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1927), 2:42-43.
- 16. Robert J. Ringer, Winning Through Intimidation (New York: Random House, 1976).
- 17. Cf., e.g., W. T. Stevenson, History As Myth (New York: Harper, 1969).



- 1. This is the position of Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 255, etc.
- 2. Manasseh, Hezekiah's son, is apparently only twelve years old when Hezekiah dies (2 Kings 21:1). That suggests that Hezekiah had no heir at the time of this illness. If that is correct, it offers further explanation for the particular bitterness of Hezekiah's weeping. The thought of the end of the Davidic dynasty is too awful to contemplate. This may also explain the appellation for God, "the God of your father David," in the response in Isa. 38:5.
- 3. There may be a parallelism between the lengthening of the life of Hezekiah and the lengthening of the life of the nation. From a merely human standpoint, Judah's life as an independent kingdom was over. If the wealthier and more powerful Israel had fallen, there was no question that Judah too would soon fall. But that leaves God out of account. If he decides that Judah's life should be extended, it will be extended, in spite of Assyria. Cf. P. Ackroyd, "An Interpretation of the Babylonian Exile: A Study of II Kings 20 and Isaiah 38–39," SJT 27 (1974): 329–52.
- 4. The version of the account in 2 Kings 20:9–11 has Hezekiah being given a choice whether the shadow should move forward or back. He chooses back as being the harder thing to do.
- 5. Calvin took it negatively; most modern commentators take it positively.
- 6. See Ps. 6:5; 30:9; 88:10–12; 115:17–18. Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 295, argues that all these references refer to dying with unforgiven sin, and thus being out of favor with God. However, as here, to have one's sins forgiven is, in fact, to be

- delivered from death. There are no references to dying with sins forgiven.
- 7. For further discussion on this point see Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 690–91. Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 260–61, argues that they are original and show an intentional theological shaping of the material, but his arguments seem strained.
- 8. The word translated "perfect" in KJV is the Heb. alem, which has the idea of being whole or undivided.



- 1. A modern equivalent for Merodach-Baladan might be Yasser Arafat. Arafat seems as indefatigable and resilient as the Babylonian was. No matter how many battles he loses, he keeps bouncing back.
- 2. In 2 Chron. 32:31 we read that God was testing Hezekiah in this instance.
- 3. Note that Elisha asked similar questions of Gehazi after Gehazi had gone to try to get something for himself from Naaman. When Gehazi tried to lie his way out, Elisha told him he had supernaturally seen the whole thing (2 Kings 5:25–27).
- 4. "Everything" (lit., "all") and "there is nothing" are emphasized in the Heb.
- 5. Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 264–66, attempts to do so because of his view that the ending of "I Isaiah" demands a positive conclusion. However, he can only do so by pointing out that there is no direct judgment on Hezekiah and that 2 Chron. makes his wealth a sign of divine blessing. This is not enough to counteract the text itself.
- 6. It is tempting to wonder if Hezekiah's attitude, "There will be peace and security in my lifetime," offers any kind of an explanation for Manasseh. Did Hezekiah's lack of concern for the future beyond himself mean that he did not give the kind of attention to his son and the formation of his spiritual life that he should have?
- 7. Note his destruction of the scroll containing the prophecies of Jeremiah (Jer. 36:22–23).



- 1. Cf. Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66: A Commentary*, trans. D. Stalker (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 32; N. Habel, "Form and Significance of the Call Narrative," *ZAW* 77 (1965): 314–16.
- 2. Cf. C. Seitz, "The Divine Council: Temporal Transition and New Prophecy in the Book of Isaiah," *JBL* 109 (1990): 229–47. Hanson, *Isaiah* 40–66 (Louisville: John Knox, 1995), 15–24, goes to great lengths to exegete the significance of the use of the divine assembly in these verses. But as a matter of fact, there is no reference to the divine assembly, and it is highly conjectural that there is even any implication of it (see Oswalt, *Isaiah* 40–66 [NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 48, 50).
- 3. Lit., "speak to the heart"; cf. Gen. 34:3; 50:21; Ruth 2:13; 2 Sam. 19:8; 2 Chron. 30:22.
- 4. It is interesting to note that the person to whom these commands are addressed is not specifically identified, nor are the "voices" in vv. 3 and 6. Childs (*Isaiah*, 302–3) says that the intent is to present these words as a continuation of those of Isaiah of Jerusalem and cites Delitzsch approvingly when he says that Isaiah is treated "like a spirit without visible form." If that is the intent but not the fact, I cannot help wondering why later writers felt it necessary to engage in this deception. An alternative view is that since Isaiah is speaking to persons far in the future, in another historic context than his own, the details of his own setting are no longer significant. In fact, if that were the case, this lack of specificity might be exactly what we would expect.
- 5. Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 301, argues that since the first two voices are indefinite, we should expect the third to be also, but then he is required to hypothesize an unknown woman since *m*^e*bas's'eret*, "you who bring good tidings," is feminine.
- 6. We tend to focus on Jeremiah's message that it was God's will for Judah and Jerusalem to fall to Babylon, but for one Jeremiah there seem to have been dozens of others prophesying in the name of the Lord that God would not let the city fall into the hands of the Babylonians. Thus, it would have been easy for many to believe that God had failed.
- 7. See Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 302–303, for a somewhat similar analysis. Other commentators vary widely. For instance John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah* 34–66 (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987), 84–90, extends the unit from Isa. 40:10 to v. 31 and sees an intricate five-part chiasm.
- 8. The Heb. *br*', "to create," occurs fifty-four times in the Old Testament in the Qal and Niphal. Of these, twenty-one are in Isaiah, and thirteen of those occurrences are between 40:26 and 45:18.
- 9. Cf. C. Stuhlmueller, "First and Last' and 'Yahweh-Creator' in Deutero-Isaiah," CBQ 29 (1967): 495-511.
- 10. The Heb. root is qwh. The parallel term is kh, which occurs in 8:17; 30:18; 64:4.
- 11. To be sure, there is a harmony between the past and the future. Thus, the "tree of life" that stood in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:9) reappears in the new Jerusalem (Rev. 22:2, 14, 19). What this says is that the new things God does are always

consistent with what he has done already. But it is not merely a circling back to re-create the past. See comments on Isa. 43:16–19.



- 1. A. Schoors, *I Am God Your Saviour: A Form-Critical Study of the Main Genres in Is. XL–LV* (VTSup 24; Leiden: Brill, 1973); R. Melugin, *The Formation of Isaiah 40–55* (BZAW 141; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1976); R. Merendino, *Der Erste und Letz: Eine Untersuchung von Je. 40–48* (VTSup 31; Leiden: Brill, 1981); J. Goldingay, "The Arrangement of Isaiah 41–45," *VT* 29 (1979): 289–99.
- 2. Some commentators who take it as the end of the preceding section are: Childs, Motyer, and Watts. Some who take it as the beginning of the next section are C. North, J. Mckenzie, and P. Bonnard, *Le Second Isae: Son disciple et leurs diteurs (Isae 40–66)* (Paris: Gabalda, 1972). C. Westermann and P. Hanson take the hymns as independent units.
- 3. This is the term *go'el*, used of Boaz in relation to Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 2:20). Boaz will marry Ruth and raise up a son to carry on the family line of Naomi's husband, Elimelech. Thus, a redeemer protects from harassment and possible slavery, preserves a posterity for the future, and provides a structure of belonging.
- 4. In Isa. 41:22, 23, and 26 the Hiphil form of the verb *ngd* ("to reveal, declare") occurs five times, as God dares the gods to give some revelation. He is the only One who can do that.
- 5. See I. Duguid, Ezekiel (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 20.
- 6. J. R. R. Tolkien, The Two Towers (New York: Ballantine, 1965), 147-53.



- 1. The reference both to the "north" and "from the rising sun" as this conqueror's point of origin is somewhat confusing. One possibility is that the prophet is speaking from the perspective of the land of Israel. Attackers from eastern lands always had to come from the north because of the desert to the east (cf. Jer. 1:13–14). Thus, Isaiah is simply using a convention of speech. Another possibility is that although Cyrus hailed from Persia to the east of Babylon, his actual approach to attack Babylon was from the north.
- 2. These statements have been an embarrassment to those commentators who deny the possibility of predictive prophecy. They have had to say that "Second Isaiah" must have predicted Cyrus's ultimate victory prior to this writing at the time when he first began to make his moves against the Babylonian Empire, but that that prophecy has since become lost. Childs (*Isaiah*, 322) says that "Second Isaiah" is referring to statements located in "First Isaiah," in such passages as Isa. 41:13. However, if those words in ch. 13 are actually "Second Isaiah's," as Childs seems to maintain, then the argument is fictitious, and "Second Isaiah" knows it. See Oswalt, *Isaiah* 40–66, 99–103.
- 3. As Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 318, notes, not only the structure but also much of the vocabulary in Isa. 41:24 and 29 are parallel. Also, with the exception of "wind," the same sequence of terms occurs in the description of the nations in 40:17. The Heb. word *tohu* ("chaos"; NIV "confusion") is a favorite of Isaiah, occurring four times between chs. 41 and 45 and seven times elsewhere in the book. In this section it appears that the ancient Near Eastern creation myth of the gods bringing order out of chaos may have been in the prophet's mind. He asserts that far from doing such a thing, they themselves are chaos and plunge their worshipers into chaos. That is not, however, what the Lord God does (see 45:18–19).
- 4. For further discussion, see Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 49–52; *Isaiah 40–66*, 107–8, 113–15.
- 5. See Isa. 43:18–19; 44:1–2, 21; 45:4; 48:20 and related descriptions in each case.
- 6. See the descriptions in 49:1–7; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12.
- 7. Some commentators are irate that the writer claims the gods cannot predict the future. B. Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaja* (HKAT; Gttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1892) in particular charged that "Deutero-Isaiah" knew perfectly well that the gods regularly predicted the future but simply chose to deny the facts. But Isaiah is not denying that the gods, or their representatives, have sought to tell the future. What he is denying is that they ever made *specific* predictions (such as naming Cyrus) that subsequently were proven correct. Westermann, *Isaiah* 40–66, 91, eloquently supports this general argument, although he certainly does not attribute the naming of Cyrus to "First Isaiah."
- 8. Isaiah, 3–4.
- 9. Cf. Richard Schultz, "NIDOTTE, 4:213–20.
- 10. Remember the booklet entitled 88 Reasons Why Jesus Will Return in 1988 that was distributed to many pastors in the United States in the spring of 1988. When Jesus did not return in September of 1988 as the author predicted, he published a supplement explaining how he had made a one-year mistake and that Jesus would come in 1989. There have been no subsequent supplements.

- 1. On the side of reading it with the preceding is that it can be seen as an expression of praise for what God has promised to do both through Cyrus and through his Servant. In this sense it is somewhat analogous to ch. 12, which concludes chs. 7—12. The majority of commentators take it this way. However, Isa. 42:10–12 looks much like the opening call to praise that characterizes the hymn form in the Psalms, followed by the reason for that call.
- 2. Childs, *Isaiah*, 332, says "the theme of the unit [14–17] is not fully clear." I think that is so because he has separated it from Isa. 42:10–13.
- 3. Cf., e.g. Young, The Book of Isaiah, 3:143.
- 4. See, e.g., Isa. 45:11; 47:8–9; 49:20, 25; 51:18, 20; 54:1, 13; 60:9; 65:23; 66:8.
- 5. Note how this paradox is developed in Rom. 9–11. If Rom. 9 is read alone, one can only conclude that the Jews rejected Christ because that is what they were predestined to do. But if one read ch. 11 alone, one will conclude that the Jews rejected Christ solely because they chose to do so. The truth encompasses both teachings.



- 1. Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 334, who takes Isa. 43:1–7 as referring to the Exodus, believes "this" is referring to that event. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 3:148, takes it to refer to the conversion of the nations. Childs, *Isaiah*, 335, says the parallel with "former things" shows that the gods are being called on to explain the past.
- 2. Note the slowly increasing specificity. In Isa. 41 it is only a man from the east whose coming will terrify the nations. In ch. 42 deliverance is promised; Babylon will fall, and God will deliver in a different way from what they might expect. This type of specificity will increase through ch. 47.
- 3. R. P. Carroll, "Second Isaiah and the Failure of Prophecy," *ST* 32 (1978): 119–31, cites passages like this to show that "Second Isaiah" predicted a miraculous deliverance from Babylon and was proven wrong. See comments on Isa. 42:15–16
- 4. The NIV choice of the future tense for the imperfect verbs in this verse is a viable one, although other possibilities must be allowed. See Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 341, n. 1.
- 5. See Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66*, 130.
- 6. This was one of the elements that caused J. Wellhausen and other scholars in the heyday of higher criticism to conclude that prophets and priests were sworn enemies, a position that is much modified now. See J. Sawyer, *Prophecy and the Prophets of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 19–22.
- 7. See Isa. 40:28; 42:18, 23; 43:1, 14.



- 1. As I have observed elsewhere (Oswalt, *Isaiah 40–66*, 170–71), this is another example of the use of a "graphic summary" to drive a point home. This contrasts with the widespread scholarly argument that Isa. 44:9–20 are not original. See also Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 343, n. 1; and Oswalt, *Isaiah 40–66*, 174, n. 36.
- 2. Motyer's observation (*Prophecy of Isaiah*, 343) that the idols have no power to change the human heart is apropos.
- 3. Many modern commentators are embarrassed for the prophet because they think he is ignorant of the complexity of pagan thought, or worse, knows it but can only attack it on the superficial point of idolatry. See, e.g., Hanson, *Isaiah* 40–66, 90–93, who suggests that "Second Isaiah" as a whole is actually teaching tolerance toward other cultures' expressions of deity. In fact, that is the opposite thing to what this book is teaching. It looks forward to the day when the other cultures will abandon their false conceptions and come to the Holy One of Israel. As I have argued both here and elsewhere, there is no reason why Isaiah would not have understood the worldview of paganism as thoroughly as he understood how idols were made. He is simply attacking paganism where the fundamental flaw in its conception of reality is most obvious—and most vulnerable.
- 4. See, e.g., Lev. 7:18; 11:10; 18:22; Deut. 7:25–26; 12:31; 18:9–13.

- 1. As noted in the comments on Isa. 42:10–43:7, the structure of this part of the book is a source of endless controversy among scholars. It is difficult to find two commentators who agree as to the precise divisions of the material. The ideas are developed in a kind of helical motion, where earlier themes reappear often with some of the same phrasings, and yet there is an advance in the thought, primarily in greater specificity. This has led some, like Schoors, *I Am God Your Saviour*, and R. Kratz, *Kyros im Deuterojesaja Buch* (FAT 1; Tbingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991), to deny that there was any original structure but that a variety of originally independent forms have been woven together by various editorial devices and insertions. Childs, *Isaiah*, 349–50, utters an appropriate word of caution about the tendency of such an approach to make the final form of the text irrelevant.
- 2. Hanson, *Isaiah 40–66*, 96. There are more than forty such occurrences here.
- 3. Whereas Heb. infinitives express pure undefined action ("running"), participles focus on the one performing the action, the actor ("one who is running"). Cf. B. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 614–15.
- 4. It is not clear why the drying up of the "deep" is referred to in the context of redemption. Many contemporary commentators see this as an allusion to the triumph of the "creator" god over chaos (cf. Hanson, *Isaiah 40–66*, 99–101), and that is certainly a possibility in view of the clear allusions in Isa. 27:1 and 51:9. However, there is also the possibility that the Exodus is being alluded to, and that would make more sense in the context of redemption (cf. Ex. 15:5; Ps. 106:9). So Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 375.
- 5. See Isa. 41:21–24, 26–27; 43:12; 44:7, 26; see also 45:20–21; 46:10; and 48:3.
- 6. See Oswalt, *Isaiah* 40–66, 192, 196–97, for further discussion. See also Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 355–56; Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 3:192. Hanson, *Isaiah* 40–66, 98–99, offers an imaginative reconstruction of "Second Isaiah's" choice of Cyrus that ignores this issue entirely.
- 7. See T. Longman III, Daniel (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 157–58.
- 8. For a good rebuttal to the idea that Persian dualism is specifically in mind here, see Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 359. The Heb. word *ra* is an inclusive term like the Eng. "bad"; it can range all the way from "misfortune" to "moral wickedness." The NIV "disaster" is a good attempt to catch the more general connotation here; "calamity" is another alternative. For a more detailed discussion, see Oswalt, *Isaiah* 40–66, 203–5.
- 9. Childs, *Isaiah*, 354, says that "a close reading does not support such a quasi-psychological interpretation" and argues that Isa. 45:9–13 are addressed to the nations. I do not know what is meant by "quasi-psychological" in this context, but I cannot imagine any reason why the nations would object to the call of Cyrus to deliver people from Babylonian oppression. This is the issue, as is shown by v. 13. I would also argue that a close reading shows a more personal and direct tone than is to be found in God's addresses to the nations in this part of the book.
- 10. C. S. Lewis, "Myth Became Fact," in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. W. Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 63–67.



- 1. In this case "Cush" (Ethiopia), considered at the time to be the southern end of the earth, represents all the most distant places of earth.
- 2. It seems likely that Isaiah is consciously contrasting the Hebrew understanding of creation with that of the pagans. The pagans believed that "chaos" (Isa. 45:18; NIV "empty," Heb. *tohu*) was the first principle from which the gods emerged and that humans were created as an afterthought to serve the gods.
- Childs, *Isaiah*, 356.
- 4. See 40:25–26; 41:6–7, 21–29; 43:8–13; 44:9–20; 45:20–21; 46:1–7.
- 5. Note that in the NRSV, only the first of these four occurrences is translated with "righteousness"; the others are translated "triumph" (45:25) and "deliverance" (46:12, 13).



- 1. In agreement with Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 371, and differing from my earlier proposal in *Isaiah 40–66*, 17, 190, where I saw ch. 47 as the conclusion of the unit beginning at 44:23.
- 2. See, e.g., Westermann, Isaiah 40-66, 188-89.
- 3. The NIV essentially agrees with this structure, although it has divided Isa. 47:5–11 into vv. 5–7 and vv. 8–11. Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 371, argues for vv. 1–7, 8–11, 12–15. Childs, *Isaiah*, 365–66, noting considerable variation among scholars, cautiously decides for the structure advocated here.

- 4. For a study of the similarities and dissimilarities between chs. 14 and 47, see Chris Franke, "The Function of the Oracles against Babylon in Isaiah 14 and 47" (SBLSP 32; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 250–59.
- 5. Isa. 57:8; Lam. 1:8; Ezek. 16:37; Mic. 1:11; Nah. 3:5.
- 6. Lit., "stray off to his own region"—probably the equivalent of the modern "every man for himself."
- 7. The interview occurred on *Morning Edition*, June 22, 2001.



- 1. B. Duhm advocated removing part or all of this chapter from the work of "Second Isaiah," because he felt it was inconsistent with the note of grace that he believed was characteristic of this author. However, careful reading shows that admonition is inherent in the material now comprising Isa. 40–48 and that this chapter is simply the climax of that admonition
- 2. Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 377, and Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 3:251, both take these "new things" to be the way in which God will deal with human sin through his Servant. Since that is the theme of Isa. 49–55, this is a plausible suggestion.
- 3. For a discussion of the implications of this chapter for the authorship of the book, see Oswalt, *Isaiah 40–66*, 270–72.
- 4. The final sentence of v. 16 has been a puzzle to commentators because the antecedent of the pronoun "me" is not clear. In the first two sentences, the speaker is clearly God, but it is equally clear that cannot be the case in the last sentence. The reference to the Spirit has led several commentators (including Delitzsch, Young, and Motyer) to conclude that the Messiah is being referred to, since the Spirit is associated with the Messiah in several places in the book (cf. 11:2; 42:1; 61:1). However, apart from that point, there is nothing else to indicate the Messiah is the referent here. I believe (with Calvin) that "me" refers to the prophet. He is saying that God has spoken in the past and is continuing to do so right up to the present through the prophet himself.
- 5. M. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990).
- 6. C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 56.
- 7. J. Walsh, The Green Book (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1982).



- 1. On the connections between 42:1–9 and 49:1–13, see Childs, *Isaiah*, 383.
- 2. Childs, *Isaiah*, 383–85, presents a strong argument for ideal Israel, although he carefully avoids identifying this figure with any specific person. Hanson, *Isaiah* 40–66, 128 says that it is both individual and collective, which makes it difficult to extract any meaning from the passage.
- 3. Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 388, is correct in saying that the Heb. of v. 6 does not have the Servant "bring" salvation to the ends of the earth. Rather, it says he will "be" God's salvation. He also makes the interesting observation that while words having to do with salvation are common throughout the book of Isaiah, they are relatively rare elsewhere in the Old Testament.
- 4. Once again (as in 48:17), the Lord is identified as "the Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel." In chs. 1–39 "the Holy One of Israel" is used primarily to express the sovereign power of the Lord as ruler of the nations. Now the ultimate purpose of that power is revealed: redemption.
- 5. The word translated "Aswan" in 49:12 is *sinim*. The DSS reads *synym*, which gives some support to an earlier suggestion that Syene (Aswan) was intended. There is no other reference to "Sinim" in the Old Testament.
- 6. See "comfort" in 51:3, 12, 19; 52:9; 54:11; "his/my people" in 51:4, 16, 22; 52:4, 5, 6, 9.



- 1. One evidence that 50:1–3 should be taken together with 49:14–26 is the recurrence of "This is what the LORD says" (49:22, 25; 51:1).
- 2. Motyer, Prophecy of Isaiah, 394.
- 3. See R. N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40–66* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 144, 146.

4. In regard to 49:26, it is important to recognize again that the language throughout this passage is highly figurative. God is saying that those who arrogantly oppress his people will actually be bringing their own destruction on themselves. More than that, those who persist in sin of any sort are doing that thing. A verse like this is not a warrant for the modern state of Israel to brutalize its enemies, nor for Christians to do such a thing. Rather, it is simply a statement of fact, which can be seen again and again in history. One example is that of Robespierre, who instituted the "reign of terror" during the French Revolution only to fall prey to that violence himself.



- 1. Many commentators see 51:1–52:12 as a unit; for example, Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 402ff. does, but he also notes an "easy progress" from ch. 50 into ch. 51. For a similar understanding of the structure of this section to that proposed here, see Watts, *Isaiah 34–66*, 193ff.; Hanson, *Isaiah 40–66*, 144–45. Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66*, 233–34, argues that Isa. 50:10–51:8 is a composite of miscellaneous materials and that the genuine words of "Second Isaiah" begin again at 51:9.
- 2. For further discussion on this point, see Oswalt, *Isaiah* 40–66, 322–23.
- 3. The NIV rendering "provide yourselves with flaming torches" is not strong enough for Heb. "gird yourselves," which at the least has a more intensive connotation and may even imply fastening the torch to one's waist (in order to have the hands free). See Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 401; Oswalt, *Isaiah* 40–66, 328, n. 44.
- 4. Westermann, *Isaiah* 40–66, 233, observes correctly that the first two of the so-called "Servant Songs" (42:1–9 and 49:1–7) are followed by commentaries, like this one, but in the previous cases, the commentary ends with a song, whereas this one does not. He therefore pulls 51:3 out and puts it after 51:8, calling it "a fragment of a song." This seems unnecessary to me. There is a lyrical quality about the entire segment that seems to belie the need for a formal expression of song (see also comments on 54:1–17).
- 5. Cf. Childs, Isaiah, 402; Delitzsch, Isaiah, 2:250.



- 1. See comments on 50:4–51:10 for discussion of this position.
- 2. As in 27:1 and 30:7, Isaiah uses the mythological imagery of the sea monster. Esp. in Babylonian and Canaanite mythology, the chief god was supposed to have defeated the monster of watery chaos prior to bringing this world into existence. While that imagery is alluded to here and in the other places, no use is made of the myth itself. Rather, Egypt is seen as the monster and the Red Sea is what was overcome. Evil is not defeated in some other-worldly realm on a continual basis but rather in the context of human experience, where God intervenes in nonrepeatable acts of grace and redemption. For further discussion see Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 408; Oswalt, *Isaiah* 40–66, 341–42.
- 3. The change in gender and number of the subjects and objects in 51:12–16 has prompted scholars to posit a number of different hands behind the verses. The change is from masculine plural in verse 12a to feminine singular in v. 12b to masculine singular in verses 13–16. But if it is understood that the movement is from the captives to Zion to Israel to the Servant, the sequence is intelligible.



- 1. See Ps. 75:8; Jer. 25:15, 17, 28; 51:7; Lam. 4:21; Ezek. 23:32–33; Hab. 2:16; Zech. 12:2; Matt. 26:42 (w. parallels in Mark and Luke); Rev. 14:10; 16:19; 17:4; 18:6.
- 2. See Isa. 10:12-19; 14:24-27; 34:1-8; 47:4-7.
- 3. Note the recurrence of such terms as "comfort," "arm of the LORD," and messenger of "good tidings" on the "mountain."



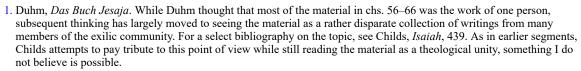
1. Note the references to speaking in the second and third of the so-called "Suffering Servant" passages (49:2; 50:4).

- 2. The pronoun translated "him" by the NIV at the end of the first clause in 52:14 is actually "you." Two possible interpretations exist, represented by the NIV and NASB. The first (cf. NIV) is that there is a mixing of second and third pronouns in referring to the Servant. This kind of mixing of pronouns is not infrequent in the prophets; see Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar, ed. E. Kautzsch, tr. A. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), 462. The other possibility is that "you" refers to the captive people, so the NASB inserts "my people" after "you." I believe the first interpretation is correct. See also Motyer, Prophecy of Isaiah, 425.
- 3. See Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 425–26, for a defense of this view. See Oswalt, *Isaiah 40–66*, 374, n. 56, for the counterargument.
- 4. See D. Clines, *I, He, We and They: A Literary Approach to Isaiah 53* (JSOTSup 1; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1976). See also E. J. Young, *Isaiah Fifty-three: A Devotional and Expository Study* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952).
- 5. An alternate interpretation of the Heb. is to be found in the NASB: "as for His generation, who considered / That He was cut off?" If this understanding is correct, then it is the idea, as in v. 3, that no one even cared enough about him to consider the injustice of his fate.
- 6. That point is clearly made in such passages as Deut. 6:10–12; Prov. 10:22; 14:24; and 19:4. However, there is the underlying theme that riches are a gift from God and should be held and used as such.
- 7. See Ps. 37:16; Prov. 11:4, 28; 13:7–8; 16:8; Hos. 12:7–8; Amos 3:14–4:1; Matt. 6:19–21.
- 8. The NASB tries to solve this problem by making the contrast between the "wicked" of Isa. 53:9a and the "rich" of v. 9b. But the Heb. does not support this.
- 9. The Heb. word *nepeš* ("life, soul, being, self") is associated with the Servant in all three verses of this stanza (NIV, "life," v. 10; "soul," v. 11; "life," v. 12). In all three cases the underlying idea is that the Servant has given his life for the sins and transgressions of others.
- 10. Unfortunately the NIV has obscured some of the power of the statement. The particle "mis better translated "if" or "when" than "though." It is when the Servant is offered up that God's purpose is achieved. The form of the verb is somewhat ambiguous, which accounts for three different translations. As it stands, it is either third fem. sing. or second masc. sing. If it is the first, then evidently "soul" (fem.) is the subject: "When she offers his soul [i.e. herself]." This has prompted some to correct to "When he [the Servant] offers his soul" (cf. NRSV). If the second option is correct, then "you" is either the hearer or God. The NIV has opted for the latter; I opt for the former. See Oswalt, Isaiah 40–66, 401–2.
- 11. R. N. Whybray, admitting that resurrection would be a logical conclusion if the Servant had indeed died, instead tries to demonstrate that he is not represented as having actually died (*Thanksgiving for a Liberated Prophet: An Interpretation of Isaiah 53* [JSOTSup 4; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978], 79–105). This seems to be a conclusion searching for evidence.
- 12. The MT simply says "he will see and be satisfied." The LXX adds "light" after "see"; this is supported by all the Qumran editions of Isaiah. This is a strong argument in favor of its originality, especially since the consonants of "light" ('or) could be confused with those for "see" (r'h). The NIV addition "of life" has no textual support.
- 13. Childs's comment that Phillip did not identify Jesus as the Servant but only used the passage to preach to the eunuch the good news of Jesus Christ (*Isaiah*, 423) seems to me to be so fine a distinction that it can only have meaning for a late twentieth-century biblical critic.
- 14. The most concerted recent attempt to do so was by R. N. Whybray in his *Thanksgiving for a Liberated Prophet*. But the fact that he has to go to great lengths to show that the apparent meaning of the text is not correct suggests that the undertaking is a futile one.



- 1. Barrenness and inability to give birth are also key themes in Isaiah (see Isa. 26:16–18; 29:22–23; 37:3; 66:9).
- 2. All the prophets make this important point in one way or another: Since it was God who caused disaster in the first place, he had the power to deliver those who met the conditions for such redemption (see, e.g., Isa. 10:5–6, 17–19). If the disaster had occurred in spite of him, then he could hardly have the ability to deliver them.
- 3. Note that while all but one of the references to the "servant" in chs. 40–48 are clearly to the nation as a whole, the proportions are exactly reversed in chs. 49–55, where only one of the references (this one in 54:17) is to the nation.





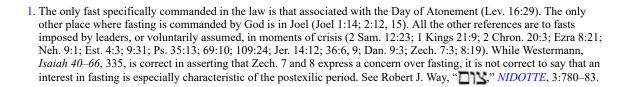
- 2. For a fuller discussion of this point, see my "Righteousness in Isaiah," 177–91. I do not disagree with Motyer's identification of these chapters as "The Book of the Anointed Conqueror" (*Prophecy of Isaiah*, 461), although the ultimate vision of the Messiah is certainly central to the material. I only wonder if that title does enough justice to the large blocks devoted to the righteousness, or lack thereof, of the Lord's servants.
- 3. These persons extend from Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66*, to Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*. For a fuller discussion see Oswalt, *Isaiah 40–66*, 461–65.
- 4. D. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 45–46.



- 1. The clear connection of what is said here (and indeed throughout this entire division) with the preexilic religious environment has constituted a problem for those who believe in multiple authorship. Westermann hypothesized the reuse of certain preexilic prophecies (*Isaiah 40–66*, 325). Childs (*Isaiah*, 463) seeks to solve the problem with an appeal to "intertextuality." He suggests that the editor responsible for this part of the book has consciously used some of the language of "First Isaiah" in order to make a point that the same spiritual attitude (although not actually the same practices?) persists in this new eschatological age. A much simpler explanation is that Isaiah is speaking about the spiritual condition in his own day *and* in the future in language that is familiar to him. He only sees those details of the distant future that are directly relevant to the revelation he is giving. That is why it has been so difficult for modern commentators to decide what the actual historical setting of "Third Isaiah" is. Isaiah is speaking to the general setting he foresees. There *is* no detailed historical setting for this material.
- 2. While it is not clear how much of the actual pagan practices the returned Jews engaged in, it seems probable that the integration into the pagan world that both Nehemiah and Ezra fought so vigorously would have included such practices. The argument of syncretism would have been strong: Since Yahweh is Baal and Baal is Yahweh, since Molech is Yahweh and Yahweh is Molech, therefore Molech and Baal's practices are Yahweh's as well. Instead of being a light to the world and bringing foreigners to the good news of the only Creator and Savior, the returnees were being sucked into the religion of the foreigners. It is also possible that Isaiah was describing a future apostasy in terms of the behavior of his own times. See J. Payne, "The Eighth Century Background of Isaiah 40–66," WTJ 29 (1967): 179–90; 30 (1968): 50–58, 185–203.
- 3. It is interesting that the Heb. of Isa. 57:13 only has "let your collection save you" (not "collection of idols"). This suggests that the prophet may not be restricting his thinking merely to idol worship but to all kinds of worship that are simply a collection of human attempts to manipulate the divine.
- 4. The great failure for which David is remembered, the adultery with Bathsheba, is so glaring because it is a blatant denial of this very characteristic in his life. David descends down to the level of serving and protecting himself.
- 5. For a sensitive yet unflinching declaration of this truth, see A. Fernando, *Sharing the Truth in Love: How to Relate to People of Other Faiths* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 2001).



- 1. The difficulty of determining the precise historical setting for chs. 56–66 supports the contention of this commentary that although the chapters are broadly addressing the concerns of those who returned from the Exile, their real context is the literary and theological one within the present book (see comments on chs. 40 and 56). Hanson, *Isaiah* 40–66, 202–3, illustrates the problem. He concludes that this segment was written by disciples of "Second Isaiah" shortly after the Return and was originally a word of encouragement to the disheartened returnees. However, he opines that later editors, immersed in a fierce conflict between the establishment and the visionaries, reused the words here to encourage the visionaries. This reconstructed setting is entirely imaginary. Childs, *Isaiah*, 473, agreeing that the theological purpose provides the main setting, responds sharply to Hanson and others that "attempts to replace Third Isaiah's own theological rendering with a sociological theory of competing groups in strife runs flatly in the face of the canonical shaping of the entire Isaianic corpus."
- 2. G. Barna, Boiling Point: It Only Takes One Degree (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 2001), 79.





- 1. The fact that Isa. 59:1–2 seem to respond directly to the question of 58:3 may explain the use of the second-person pronouns. The appearance of the third person in Isa. 59:4–8 may signal a wider reflection on the sin problem.
- 2. Hanson, *Isaiah 40–66*, 210, aptly observes that in such a society, "rewards go not to the honest person seeking to contribute to society but to those seeking to rob it for their own gain."
- 3. Heb. m^e sillah (59:7d, "way") occurs elsewhere at 7:3; 11:16; 19:23; 33:8; 36:2; 40:3; 49:11; 62:10, and only fifteen times elsewhere in the Old Testament; derek (59:8a, "way") occurs forty-eight times in the book (total of 706 in the Old Testament); m^a gal (59:8b, "path") appears here and in 26:7 (total of sixteen in Old Testament, with seven in Prov.); n^e tibah (59:8c, "road") occurs elsewhere in Isa. at 42:16; 43:16; 58:12 (total, twenty-one).
- 4. As Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 487, observes, on the physical plane there is some hope of curing blindness, but if a person has no eyes, the situation is hopeless.
- 5. It is interesting to watch secular humanism, in championing justice for the poor, enthusiastically embracing an evolutionary theory that denies any basis in a creation order. Instead, they base their theory on "unalienable rights." But whence come these rights? The American Declaration of Independence says that we have been endowed with them by our Creator. If there is no Creator, there are no rights; it is "survival of the fittest."



- 1. Many commentators do not see this kind of integral connection of 59:15b–21 with what precedes it. For fuller discussion, see Oswalt, *Isaiah* 40–66, 525–32. Childs (*Isaiah*, 484–91) has now taken a similar position.
- 2. Hanson, *Isaiah* 40–66, 212–17, goes to some lengths to identify and interpret this passage as a retreat to an apocalyptic vision by a marginalized and discouraged minority who see no possibility of deliverance in the historical era. In fact, this description of the Lord's arm is no more obviously apocalyptic in tone than are the four passages revealing the ideal Servant in chs. 40–55. All five passages speak of the central figure in metaphorical and sweeping terms and point to future action by the figure. It is only that in the former ones evil is conquered by submission, whereas here (and in 63:1–6) it is conquered by victory. That does not make the material apocalyptic. For a discussion of apocalyptic, see J. Oswalt, "Recent Studies in Old Testament Apocalyptic," in *The Face of Old Testament Studies*, ed. D. Baker and B. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 369–90.
- 3. The second sentence in 59:19 constitutes a problem. The NIV and other modern translations take \$\(\sigma a\) ("oppress, constrict") to be an attributive adjective modifying "river," as the word order suggests (thus, "like a pent-up flood"). The KJV, because of an agreement problem, elected to read \$\(\sigma a\) as "an oppressor." In the second colon, the question revolves around the meaning of the rare verb \$nos^e sah\$. "Drive along" makes better sense in the context of a pent-up river than does the alternative "raise a banner."
- 4. The law was capable of enabling people to remain in relationship with God. What it could not do, because of the power of entrenched self-centeredness, which Paul calls "the flesh," was to stop them from sinning. But the Spirit of Christ can. Thus, the life described in Rom. 8:4–8 is in complete contradiction to that described in 7:14–25.
- 5. For more on these ideas, see J. Oswalt, *Called to Be Holy* (Nappanee, Ind.: Evangel, 1999).



- 1. "Glory" and "the glory of the LORD" are important themes in Isaiah. All attempts by humans to glorify themselves, whether in accomplishments (Isa. 3:8) or in making the gods in the image of humanity (44:13), are doomed to failure because the earth is "full of [the LORD's] glory" (6:3) and none other (cf. also 24:15; 26:15; 35:2; 40:5; 41:16; 42:8, 12; 58:8; 59:19; 60:19; 66:18, 19). But the wonder is that he intends to share that glory with his people, as is seen here (cf. also 4:2, 5; 44:23; 60:19).
- 2. It is not clear why special emphasis is given to peoples of Arabia and other areas southeast of Judah: Midian, Ephah, Kedar, and Nebaioth (vv. 6–7). Since Midian, Ephah, and Nebaioth are all named in Genesis as descendants of Abraham (Gen. 25:2, 4, 13), there may be some intention of specifying that all of Abraham's children will be reunited. There may also be an allusion to the incidents of Judg. 6–8.
- 3. Cf. Isa. 49:21; 51:18-20; 54:1-8; 66:7-9.
- 4. The figure of speech is reminiscent of the Egyptian representations of the pharaoh sitting in the lap of the goddess Isis nursing at her breast. It is a way of saying that the pharaoh is divine. So here Isaiah is saying that Zion goes from being an orphan to a child of royalty.
- 5. Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66*, 363–64, and Whybray, *Isaiah 40–66*, 237, consider Isa. 60:19–20 to be intrusive because they speak of a time when there is no sun or moon, and this is supposedly a feature of later apocalyptic. However, note that 60:1–2 already mention that "the glory of the LORD *rises* upon you." Already, then, the poetic language of the passage is treating God as the sun. It is a small step from there to saying that the sun and moon are not needed.
- 6. Whybray, *Isaiah 40–66*, 229, says that the words "have lost the sharp outlines of a concrete expectation" and that "a future *state* [author's emphasis] of Jerusalem" is depicted "rather than a concrete *act* [author's emphasis] of salvation."
- 7. For a discussion of this prayer see G. Burge, John (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 458–80.
- 8. Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 497.



- 1. Delitzsch, Commentary on Isaiah, 2:396–99; Whybray, Isaiah 40–66, 240; Hanson, Isaiah 40–66, 223–24; Watts, Isaiah 34–66, 301–2.
- 2. See 9:1–7; 11:1–16; 16:5; 32:1–7; 33:13–19. Childs, *Isaiah*, 505, gives a guarded endorsement to this position, saying that when early Christians linked Servant and Messiah, that was a "legitimate reader response," but that we must not "read back a servant/Messiah figure into Isa. 61." With respect, I do not believe those two statements are compatible with each other. A reader-response that is not consistent with the author's intent is not legitimate. If Childs means to say that Isaiah did not have a fully developed picture of the way in which Jesus Christ would flesh out the things that are said of him here, I fully agree. But that is not to say that he was speaking of someone other than the Messiah when he said these words. See Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 499, for a clear insistence that the Messiah is intended.
- 3. See 12:1–6; 42:10–13; 49:13–21; 54:1–17.
- 4. J. Thompson, Handbook of Life in Bible Times (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 89.
- 5. Cf. Rom. 12:1-2; Gal. 5:22-25; Eph. 2:10; 4:17-24; Col. 2:20-3:11; Heb. 9:14.



- 1. There are a number of other reminiscences of chapters 40–55 here, such as "watchmen" (62:6; cf. 52:8); "highway" (62:10; cf. 40:3); "reward recompense" (62:11; cf. 40:10). Whereas this feature might be taken as evidence for single authorship of the book, most modern scholars, having a prior commitment to multiple authorship, see this as a striking example of "intertextuality," the idea that later biblical writers allude to earlier ones. Cf. B. Sommers, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40–66* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1998). He argues for the unitary authorship of Isa. 35 and 40–66 on the basis of what he sees as a common pattern of allusion. He does not grant that the allusions to the earlier chapters of the book can support unitary authorship of the whole.
- 2. The textual evidence is in favor of retaining "sons" in Isa. 62:5. This creates a problem for the imagery since laws of incest prohibit a son from marrying his mother. Perhaps there is a mixing of metaphor and literal here, with the joy of the return of the descendants to the land being compared to the joy of a wedding (cf. 62:4, "your land will be married").
- 3. Isa. 37:30; 65:20-21; Jer. 31:5; Amos 9:14.
- 4. P. Tournier, The Meaning of Persons, trans. E. Hudson (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 75.

- 1. The divine ability appears in Isa. 63:1-6; 65:6-25; 66:7-16, 18-24; human inability in 63:7-65:5; 66:1-6.
- 2. For examples of this teaching in each of the Pauline letters, see Rom. 6:15–18; 1 Cor. 5:6–11; 2 Cor. 6:14–7:1; Gal. 5:13–26; Eph. 4:17–5:20; Phil. 2:12–18; Col. 3:1–17; 1 Thess. 3:11–4:12; 5:12–24; 2 Thess. 3:6–15; 1 Tim. 6:6–16; 2 Tim. 3:1–17; Titus 3:3–8; Philem. 8–14. See also 1 John 1:6–7; 3:6.



- 1. Whybray, *Isaiah 40–66*, 255, notes that Isa. 63:7–64:12 fits the pattern of a communal lament (see, e.g., Ps. 80), with a recounting of God's saving work in the past (Isa. 63:7–14), an appeal for help (63:15–64:5), a confession of sin (64:6–7), and a renewed appeal for help (64:8–12).
- 2. In both occurrences of "kindness" in v. 7, the Heb. *hesed* is used. There is no single English word that captures all the nuances of the Heb. term. At its heart is the idea of "passionate commitment of one who has to one who has not, especially when the commitment cannot be compelled" (see D. A. Baer and R. P. Gordon, "NIDOTTE, 2:211–18).
- 3. Delitzsch, *Commentary on Isaiah*, 2:431, argues that a developed understanding of the Trinity is presented here with the "angel of his presence" (63:9) representing the second person of the Trinity.
- 4. Gianni Vattimo, After Christianity (Italian Academy Lectures; New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2002).



- 1. There are an unusual number of complex textual problems found in this unit. For discussions of them, see Oswalt, *Isaiah* 40–66, 609–11, 617–20, 627–28.
- 2. Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 516, divides the lament into seven stanzas, chiastically arranged, but as with many of his suggested chiasms in the book, I remain unconvinced that this literary design is really present here.
- 3. A lit. trans. of Isa. 63:19 is "Behold us, from of old you have not ruled over them; your name was not called over them." The comparative prefixed to the relative (*ka'ašer*) is implied. Thus: "We are like those over whom you never ruled, those who were never called by your name." Cf. NASB, NRSV, NLT, etc.
- 4. That's why God had said to Moses that he could not go with the rebellious people, lest his very presence should kill them (Ex. 33:3).
- 5. "Filthy rags" is lit. "menstrual cloths."
- 6. It is to be wondered if perhaps the prophet designed this lament on purpose, not only to expose once again the sinful condition of the people but also to expose a false approach to the problem, in which the onus for its solution is taken off the sinner and placed on God. The response of God in Isa. 65 suggests this may be the case.
- 7. A recent expression of this position is that of G. Boyd, God of the Possible (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).
- 8. See Motyer, Prophecy of Isaiah, 517, on this point.
- 9. This is one reason why God often chose the rejects of society, such as second-born sons or barren women, as the objects of his special favor. If they would respond to his offers with faith and obedience, he would show the world through them that there are limitless possibilities in him.
- 10. At the same time, when we read of all the setbacks and disappointments that pioneer families suffered while still retaining their faith in themselves and God and in the possibility of eventual success, we have to say that life was terribly complex then too.



- 1. Whybray, Isaiah 40-66, 266-67.
- 2. Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 523–24, argues that Isa. 65:1 is actually the introduction to the final two chapters and that the reference is to God's calling of the Gentiles. I think this flies in the face of the nearer context. See the comments above.
- 3. Note that the initial description of human moral corruption in Gen. 6:5 speaks of the complete corruption of the way we form the devisings of the heart. The ways we devise for ourselves are necessarily corrupt.
- 4. Much the same argument can be found in the book of Malachi, where the prophet insists that the blessings of God have eluded the people because they are seeking blessing and not God. See J. Oswalt, *Where Are You, God* (Nappanee, Ind.:

Evangel, 1999).

5. D. M. Brown, Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 49-51.



- 1. See J. Oswalt, "Recent Studies in Old Testament Apocalyptic," 369–90.
- 2. If I am right that these verses include reference to a literal reign of Christ on a redeemed earth, how are we to understand the mention of death in Isa. 65:20? There are at least two possibilities. (1) There will continue to be cessation of earthly life in the Millennium, but it will no longer be an occasion of fear (see C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* [New York: Macmillan, 1972]). (2) The language is still figurative to speak of a kind of life that is full and fulfilling.



- 1. For some of the alternatives proposed, see J. Oswalt, *Isaiah 40–66*, 665, n. 13.
- 2. See W. Beuken, "Isaiah LXV–LXVI: Trito-Isaiah and the Closure of the Book of Isaiah," *Congress Volume, Leuven 1989* (VTSup 34; Leiden: Brill, 1991), 204–21; Childs, *Isaiah*, 539; Oswalt, *Isaiah 40–66*, 664–65; E. Webster, "A Rhetorical Study of Isaiah 66," *JSOT* 34 (1986): 93–108.
- 3. Cf. Hanson, Isaiah 40-66, 250.
- 4. See 26:16–18; 29:23; 37:3; 49:19–21; 51:17–20; 54:1–3.
- 5. See 40:1; 49:13; 51:3, 12, 19; 52:9; 54:11; 57:18; 61:2.
- 6. A lit. rendering of the first part is: "But I—their works and their plans—it (fem.) is coming to gather." Perhaps the sense is: "But I [know] their works and their plans and [the time] is coming to gather." There is no consensus among the versions. See the discussion in Oswalt, *Isaiah 40–66*, 681, n. 60.
- 7. See esp. Matt. 24:30; Luke 11:30; John 1:14; 12:18.
- 8. Cf. Childs, Isaiah, 542; Motyer, Prophecy of Isaiah, 542–43; Westermann, Isaiah 40–66, 426; Whybray, Isaiah 40–66, 291–92.
- 9. See Isa. 59:7; 65:2; 66:3.
- 10. Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman Jr., In Search of Excellence (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 76ff.
- 11. Ps. 78:71; Isa. 19:25; Jer. 10:16; Joel 3:2.
- 12. To a great extent that *is* the vision of heaven presented in the Qur'an. It is all about rewards. Even in heaven the idea of intimate fellowship with Allah is faintly blasphemous.

JEREMIAH AND LAMENTATIONS

THE NIV APPLICATION COMMENTARY

From biblical text . . . to contemporary life

J. ANDREW DEARMAN



This volume is dedicated to my sister Jan Dearman:

A missionary among the nations,
she is one who can boast in the Lord (see Jer. 9:23–24).

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General Editor's Preface

THE THEME OF RIGHTEOUS KINGS, aided by powerful religious figures and reforming wayward people groups, is not an uncommon one in Middle Eastern and Asian history. One thinks, for example, of Asoka in Buddhist India, Constantine in Christian Rome, and Saladin in Islamic Palestine.

Typically, these righteous kings did not attempt to become religious leaders themselves by usurping power from bhikkhus, priests, and imams. Instead, they attempted reform of declining and/or wayward religious institutions. They rebuilt dilapidated religious buildings—or built brand new ones. They replaced immoral religious leaders with moral ones. They convened councils of religious leaders to articulate doctrine more fully in the face of new challenges. Often, they reemphasized religion's privileged place in the life of their cultures. In general they acted as the consciences of drifting religious people.

As J. Andrew Dearman shows us in this commentary, the initial period of the book of Jeremiah is set in the context of such a king, Josiah. With the help of the prophet Jeremiah, Josiah attempted to restore not only the political but also the spiritual life of his nation, Judah. Unlike Asoka, Constantine, and Saladin, however, Josiah's reforms failed. To be sure, he did achieve some short-term successes. These successes, however, were temporary, as evidenced by the growing failures of Josiah's successors to maintain Israel's fidelity to their agreement with God. That failure had disastrous effects. Eventually Babylon conquered Judah and took thousands of Judeans into exile.

How are we to understand this unusual series of events? What lessons do they teach us? Should we pray for a modern "king-prophet" tandem to rise up and cleanse us? What would make them successful?

The common wisdom is that biblical stories of king-prophet alliances in attempting to keep their societies on the straight and narrow have as their common theme that spiritual faithfulness is more important than political good fortune. Although prophets frequently label political meltdowns as God's judgment and political successes as evidence of God's blessings, they also manage to elevate the importance of the spiritual over the political. Thus, even though Josiah's political strategies ultimately fail at the hands of

his Egyptian killers, his attempts at moral reform earn him the label of ruler without equal (2 Kings 23:25).

At least that is the common wisdom. But to read the prophets—and Jeremiah is no exception—is to read over and over again that spiritual faithfulness and political good fortune go hand in hand in a cause-effect relationship (and vice versa, spiritual unfaithfulness leads to political calamities). The spiritual task of faithfully upholding one's end of the covenant leads to God's protection from political enemies and economic ruin. The common wisdom that spirituality is more important than political expertise doesn't measure up to the frequency with which these judgments are made, and one is left feeling that a broader understanding is needed.

That broader understanding must acknowledge two things before it becomes useful for us today. (1) The identification between spiritual faithfulness and political success was much greater in Jeremiah's day than in ours. The Israelites were not too far from theocracy, rulership by God himself, as managed by priests. Even after they began to have kings, it was made clear that the kings ruled by God's choice and at God's sufferance. No political ruler today even comes close to having such a mandate.

(2) Today, even after we realize this first difference, we must clearly prioritize the two factors: spirituality first, politics second. Or better, we should see politics as a fruit of spirituality, not its root or its synonym. The Bible is clear that "politics" by any name is temporal while all the roads that lead to God usher us into the presence of eternity. Blessings along the way are nice—and to some extent needed for the journey. But they are just rest stops. Great "kings" are like hoteliers, themselves making life more comfortable and faithful, but always ready to move us on—and eventually move on themselves.

Abbreviations

AB Anchor Bible

ABD Anchor Bible Dictionary

Ant. Josephus, Jewish Antiquities

AUSS Andrews University Seminary Studies

BA Biblical Archaeologist

BAR Biblical Archaeology Review

Bib Biblica

BZAW Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

IEJ Israel Exploration Journal

ITC International Theological Commentary

JBL Journal of Biblical Literature

JNSL Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages

JSOT Journal for the Study of the Old Testament

JSOTSup Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series

LXX Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament)

MT Masoretic Text

NCB New Century Bible

NICOT New International Commentary on the Old Testament

NIDOTTE New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis

NIV New International Version

NIVAC NIV Application Commentary

OTL Old Testament Library

RB Revue biblique

RevQ Revue de Qumran

RHR Revue de l'histoire des religions

SBLDS Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series

Ta'an. Ta'anit

TynBul Tyndale Bulletin

VT Vetus Testamentum

WBC Word Biblical Commentary

WMANT Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament

ZAW Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

Introduction to Jeremiah

The Transmission and Collection of Jeremiah's Message

THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH in Hebrew is the second-longest book in the Old Testament, exceeded only by the Psalter. The Greek version of Jeremiah, however, is about one-sixth shorter than the Hebrew and its contents are arranged differently, two of several reasons why the textual analysis of Jeremiah is complicated. No consensus exists as to the reasons for the disparity in versions. Probably it goes back to the exilic communities who received and transmitted collections of Jeremiah's oracles that the prophet had delivered repeatedly in previous years.

Already in the fifth year of Jehoiakim Jeremiah had instructed Baruch, his scribal companion, to produce a written scroll of his oracles (604 B.C.; Jer. 36:2, 9). When that scroll was destroyed by Jehoiakim, another was produced with additional oracles (36:32; cf. 45:1). During the reign of Zedekiah Jeremiah corresponded with Judeans in Babylon (ch. 29). After Gedaliah's murder he and Baruch were still engaged in prophetic activity in Egypt, where there was a substantial Judean community (chs. 43–44). Thus, there were likely written copies of some of Jeremiah's oracles in Palestine, Egypt, and Babylonia even before the prophet's death, along with people in each of these regions who had known Jeremiah and were interested in preserving his words after his death. We should also reckon with the possibility that oral tradition, derived from both Jeremiah and Baruch, accompanied the earlier collections and continued to be passed among disciples after Jeremiah's death until its inclusion in the scroll.

The circle(s) responsible for the final form of Jeremiah are not well known, even though some who helped Jeremiah preserve and disseminate his oracles are named in the book. Baruch certainly had a major role in preserving the Jeremiah traditions (i.e., oracles, sermons, and narratives about Jeremiah); perhaps it was even a family affair, since Baruch's brother Seraiah (a Judean official) also assisted Jeremiah with the deliverance of a prophetic message to Babylon (51:59–64).² In addition to these scribal companions, there must have been disciples who learned the gist of his message and who passed along his words in the aftermath of Jerusalem's fall.

It remains difficult, however, to reconstruct the stages through which the book of Jeremiah passed to reach its final Hebrew and Greek forms or to determine the dates of the final forms. Clearly in the case of the Hebrew text the date was not before the reference to Jehoiachin's release (52:31–34), which can be dated to 561 B.C. By this time both Jeremiah and Baruch were likely dead. Since the book itself does not claim an author (i.e., the final author is anonymous), interpreters are simply left with few clues as to the production of the book in its final form(s).³ Most English versions (including the NIV) follow the Hebrew text and its arrangement of chapters.

The vantage point of the final compilers of the book was similar to that of the historical Jeremiah and Baruch in one very important respect: They too lived after the tragic fall of Judah. Virtually every line in the book is preserved to help explain the recent past to readers. How could God's people fall to the Babylonians? Was God impotent to deal with the power of Babylon, was he simply uncaring, or did he judge Judah by allowing the state to bring this tragedy upon itself? In seeking to explain the past, the book also instructs readers in exercising their faith for their own day. The book presents plenty of things to be avoided (e.g., idolatry, injustice) as well as things to be emulated (e.g., repentance, hope). Finally, the book points to a future that lies open to the action of God in history, even though some of the hopes for that future are as yet unrealized.

These three things, then—explanation of the past, instruction for the present, and hope for future transformation—are the primary functions of the book of Jeremiah.

The Arrangement of the Book's Contents

WHOEVER WAS RESPONSIBLE for the book of Jeremiah did not arrange its contents chronologically. This causes consternation on the part of some readers. Indeed, no theory about the process of the book's composition has reached consensus among interpreters. One can point, however, to subunits within the book that are collections of traditions united thematically (e.g., chs. 2–20; 27–29; 30–32; 37–44). Readers will often recognize links (both verbal and thematic) between proximate chapters, even if reasons for the structure and arrangement of the book as a whole eludes them.

At one level of reading, the book's arrangement is not unlike that of a snowball: It is a collection of materials brought together by a movement of repeating the prophet's words and re-presenting his life.⁴ Those who compiled the book seem more interested in collecting a full measure of Jeremiah traditions than in arranging the materials according to some comprehensive scheme.⁵ It is finally a statement of faith to conclude that God, who raised up Jeremiah, also raised up anonymous editors who have left us with authoritative portraits of the prophet and reliable summaries of his oracles.

Although there is no scholarly consensus about the composition and arrangement of the book, the final form of the Hebrew version does suggest some major structural divisions and an overall theme to the collection of oracles. The book begins with God's promise to make Jeremiah a prophet to the nations (ch. 1), and it ends with oracles about other nations (chs. 46–51) and another report⁶ about the fall of Judah (ch. 52). Thus the theme of "prophet to the nations" does describe the stance of the book as a whole and its portrait of Jeremiah. The fate of Judah—which is on center stage throughout most of the book—is set in the context of God's lordship over the nations as a whole. The God who has called Israel as a people is none other than the Creator of the world and moral Judge of all nations.⁷

One can see a major structural element in Jeremiah by a division of the book in two sections (chs. 1–25; 26–52). Within the first section there is a mixture of literary genres (see below), but the material is united in theme (largely judgmental on Israel and Judah) and by a persistent lack of regnal dates to situate the oracles in a more precise historical context. Chapter 25 is a summary of judgmental prophecy and may at some point have ended an early collection of Jeremiah's prophecies. Further structural divisions within chapters 1–25 may be identified, but they offer few clues to the overall shape of the book.

The second section has three major subsections (chs. 26–36; 37–44; 46–51). Chapters 26 and 36 are "bookends" that have the rejection of God's word as their theme. Within this subsection, however, is the "book of consolation" (chs. 30–31) and other hopeful material that looks beyond immediate historical disaster toward renewal. The narratives in chapters 37–44 cluster around the fall of Jerusalem and its aftermath, as even the

surviving remnants are caught up in self-destructive activities. Chapters 46–51 are oracles against and about other nations.

Literary Characteristics of the Book's Contents

THE BOOK CONTAINS different types of literature in its collection of materials. Poetry and prose are the two most common types of literature, and these two broad categories can be subdivided. In the poetry are such things as judgment speeches, individual laments, and prophecies of future salvation. In the prose are sermons and biographical accounts. In his groundbreaking work, S. Mowinckel describes Jeremiah as comprised of three different sources: poetic oracles (A), biographical narratives (B), and prose sermons (C). The poetry of source A is largely that of Jeremiah, the biographical narratives go back to Baruch and others, and source C is influenced by Deuteronomy and derives from Jeremiah's exilic editors.

A number of scholars have followed Mowinckel's lead either in whole or in part. Others, in reaction, have seen the prose vocabulary of the sermons and biographic narratives as part of the scribal prose of the era—related to Deuteronomy and the books of Kings—but not something that should be divorced necessarily from the prophet himself and his early circle of disciples. The issue is not that of faith or skepticism: God, who raised up Jeremiah, can also use the creativity of editors! In the opinion of the present author there is no compelling reason to doubt that Jeremiah (and Baruch) could employ prose forms of expression or that they could be influenced by a work like Deuteronomy.

The attention to literary types and forms of expression in Jeremiah helps us to see what is unique to Jeremiah, especially when compared with other prophetic books. On the one hand, Jeremiah has judgment speeches and prophecies of salvation in common with other prophetic books. On the other hand, three things stand out by comparison: the individual prayers Jeremiah offers, his prose sermons, and the number and range of biographical accounts. No other prophet offers lamentation and confession to God about his circumstances in the manner of Jeremiah, although the language and tone are similar to the laments in the Psalter. No other prophetic book has prose sermons like those of Jeremiah (so similar in tone to Deuteronomy and the hortatory material in 1–2 Kings). More

biographical accounts exist for Jeremiah than for any other prophetic figure in the Latter Prophets. For all the difficulty in accounting for the shape of the book of Jeremiah, we know more about this prophet's prayers and events than about any other prophet.

The Interpretation of the Book of Jeremiah and Its Influence¹²

IT IS WORTH noting that the influence of both Jeremiah and Baruch continued well past the compiling of this book.¹³ In postbiblical Jewish traditions, Baruch, 2 Baruch, 3 Baruch, and 4 Baruch (also called the Paraleipomena Ieremiou) as well as the so-called Epistle of Jeremiah¹⁴ each indicates how the figures of Jeremiah and Baruch continued to be of interest to Jews and Christians and how centuries after the compiling of Jeremiah's book the two figures were employed to interpret the faith for believing communities.

(1) The New Testament joins in this interpretive enterprise. When Jesus instructed his disciples about the prophet's reward (Matt. 5:11–12), he could have used Jeremiah as a prime example. It is also the case that the canonical portraits of Jesus as the suffering Messiah are shaped, in part, by the biographical accounts of the persecution and rejection of Jeremiah. Some of the closest parallels in the canon to the narratives of Jesus' ministry are the prose biographical accounts of the prophets—particularly of their witness to and rejection by contemporaries.¹⁵ Through the Gospels the accounts of Jeremiah's prophetic suffering are retroactively illuminated as pointers to the fulfillment of the ministry of Christ.

For Christian instruction, Jeremiah is to be read as part of the canonical record of God's self-revelation. Interpretation is aided by historical or literary methods by which any reader may understand better this prophet and book. The goal of a theological interpretation of Jeremiah, however, is not only to grasp the book's particular witness to God's self-revelation but also to see that particular witness as an integral part of Scripture as a whole. Thus my comments in the Bridging Contexts and Contemporary Significance sections will make references to other scriptural texts as indications of Jeremiah's place in the larger biblical-theological enterprise.

(2) Reading Jeremiah as instruction for Christian faith means reading the book as the revelation of the God and Father of Jesus Christ, as an

anticipation of the gospel revealed in and through Christ the Redeemer, and in dependence on the Holy Spirit, who convicts one of sinfulness and assures one of forgiveness in Christ. Stated differently, a Christian hermeneutic for interpreting Scripture should be consistent with God's triunity, a formulation of the early church that ultimately makes a doctrine of God specifically Christian. An adequate mode of interpreting Scripture for Christian faith, therefore, places Christ at the center of confession while affirming that the Old Testament revelation is an authoritative disclosure of God in pre-Christian form. One of the most surprising (and encouraging) developments in the second half of the twentieth century has been the revival of Trinitarian theology among both mainline Protestant and evangelical churches.¹⁶

A related way to grasp the link between the Old and New Testaments and to affirm Christ as the true scope¹⁷ of Scripture is to see him in his threefold office as the true prophet, priest, and king of God's people. This is an interpretation that goes back to the patristic and Reformation periods, particularly among the churches who are heir to the legacy of John Calvin, but it has been adopted by other schools of thought as well. It need not be thought of in rigid dogmatic terms but as one way among others to see Christ as the culmination of what God began through the prophetic movement, the priestly ministry, and the royal house in Israel.¹⁸

(3) Christians should read Jeremiah ecclesiologically, since much of the book is in the form of corporate addresses to Israel, Judah, or remnants thereof. To be sure, individuals can profit spiritually from the book, but the primary audience for the compilers is a significant indicator of the categories in which Jeremiah thought (and thus through which God intended to communicate). A "bridging" mechanism employed in this commentary is the conviction that an address to Israel or Judah should be directed to the church through Christ and in light of the gospel. The church inherits the promises made to and essential responsibilities expected of Israel in the Old Testament.

The New Testament witness proclaims that in Christ there is a fulfillment "already" of Israel's covenants and promises, yet it is restrained in projecting a "not-yet fulfillment" of future hope in a people called Israel.¹⁹ Thus Israel's future restoration, so gloriously depicted in the Old Testament, is organically related to the church in the unfolding plan of salvation. Thus,

it is in the church (= people of God) that such prophecies have found and will find fulfillment.²⁰ Likewise, Israel's covenant responsibilities revealed in Torah and the Prophets and set forth in institutional life have their typological counterparts in the church, where Christ, the mediator of the new covenant through his blood, has created a fellowship of disciples through the power of the Spirit.²¹

Since there are clear differences between ancient Israel and the modern church, interpreters should not expect a one-to-one correspondence between the message to ancient Israel and that to the church. An Old Testament text should be heard through Christ and in light of the gospel. The reason is simple enough, even if the process of interpretation is complicated: For Christians there can be no other foundation than that laid in Christ. What the Law or the Prophets (indeed, the Old Testament as a whole!) could not do—although they bear authoritative witness to it—Christ has done. Nevertheless, both ancient Israel and modern church are graciously called "the people of God," so that God's word through Jeremiah to his people of old can be interpreted as a word to the current generation of his people as they seek to be obedient to the gospel.

Christians have developed other methods for interpreting Old Testament prophecy for and about the church. Some of these may put more emphasis on the distinction between Israel and the modern church and on the fulfillment of Old Testament prophetic hope in a spiritually renewed Israel within the bounds of the ancient promised land (complete with a millennial reign of Christ in Jerusalem). Readers are invited to investigate for themselves the advantages of other approaches.²²

The Last Years of the Judean State: Jeremiah's Historical Context

Reconstructing Chronology²³

ACCORDING TO JER. 1:2, God called Jeremiah to his task in the thirteenth year of King Josiah. This simple reference masks more than one chronological difficulty in the modern calculation of dates in antiquity. Quite apart from the task of establishing the thirteenth year of King Josiah according to modern reckoning (essentially the calendar year 627 B.C.; see

below), some scholars have concluded that the "call" of Jeremiah narrated in 1:2 is actually the date of Jeremiah's birth, not the beginning of his prophetic career.²⁴ If Jeremiah was born in the thirteenth year of Josiah, then his delivery of public oracles probably did not begin until the end of Josiah's thirty-one-year reign. This would account for the fact that little in the book is explicitly dated to Josiah's reign.

For other scholars, the thirteenth year of Josiah is indeed the commencement of Jeremiah's prophetic ministry, while he was a young man (probably a teenager).²⁵ The few references to Josiah in Jeremiah (3:6; 25:3; 36:2) do assume that he actually prophesied during Josiah's reign, even if no other specific dates or settings from Josiah's reign are provided. Perhaps his public speaking during Josiah's reign was sporadic, with interludes of silence, and largely supportive of the king's reforming efforts. Since a primary aim of this book is to account for Judah's fall to the Babylonians, much of the prophet's preaching before 605 may have been left out. In any case, some of the undated oracles in chapters 2–20 may come from the period of Josiah's reign and before the rise of Babylon to power in 605.²⁶ What is clear from the book is that the dated oracles fall almost exclusively in the reigns of Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah, and during the brief governorship of Gedaliah (i.e., from ca. 609 to 585 B.C.).

Jeremiah 1:2 (thirteenth year of Josiah) also represents the most common type of chronological difficulty for interpretation, that is, the reconstruction of an absolute date. Changes in political hegemony or in dynastic rule, coupled with differing customs as to the beginning of a calendar year (spring or autumn) or the dating of an initial year of rule (accession year or new-year dating), mean that many events are dated by approximation and/or are given in overlapping years.²⁷ Thus interpreters will see among scholarly reconstructions such dates as 628, 627, or 626 B.C. for Josiah's thirteenth year, or sometimes the double reference 628/627 or 627/626 B.C.

Perhaps the biggest discussion of a date in Jeremiah's lifetime concerns the time of Jerusalem's destruction by the Babylonians. Some scholars conclude that it took place in 587 B.C.; others have claimed 586.²⁸ The date depends on the reckoning of the date of Jehoiachin's exile to Babylon, the related dating(s) of Zedekiah's reign, the references to exiles taken to Babylon in both Nebuchadnezzar's eighteenth year (52:29) and nineteenth

year (52:12; cf. 2 Kings 25:8), and the evidence of the Babylonian Chronicles. In a commentary of this nature, it is less important to argue which year is preferable and more important to ask about the significance assigned by the prophet to the city's destruction.

Judean Kings and Political History²⁹

JOSIAH IS CELEBRATED as a king without a peer in Judah (2 Kings 23:25). In summary, he ascended the throne (ca. 640 B.C.) at the age of eight, and during his reign of thirty-one years he instituted a nation-wide religious reform as well as extricated Judah from its status as vassal to the Assyrians. He died in battle with the Egyptians (609 B.C., 2 Kings 23:29–30). Josiah was not the only casualty in the struggle between Egypt and Babylon that developed in the last years of the seventh century. Ultimately the whole region of Syria-Palestine was affected by the struggle.

To grasp the significance of Josiah's reign, its tragic aftermath, and its influence on the period of Jeremiah's public ministry, we must consider briefly Judah's dealings with Assyria. For at least fifty years previously, Assyria had held Judah as its vassal (just as it held virtually all of the eastern Mediterranean states). Even earlier the prophets Amos and Hosea had announced divine judgment on Israel and Samaria, and in the last quarter of the eighth century the Assyrians laid siege to Samaria. The city and what remained of the nation fell in 722/721 B.C.

Judah managed to escape destruction when Ahaz submitted to the Assyrian ruler Tiglath-pileser III and became his vassal (2 Kings 16:1–17:6). His wickedness was partially overcome by his son Hezekiah, who instituted a religious reform and rebelled against the Assyrians (2 Kings 18:1–7). The Assyrians attacked Hezekiah and Jerusalem in 701, and although the Lord miraculously spared the city and dynasty from destruction (2 Kings 18:13–19:37), Judah would soon enter Assyrian vassal status and remain there until Josiah's reign.

Although there were earlier signs of weakness in Assyria, its dissolution accelerated rapidly by 627 B.C. The death of its last strong king, Assurbanipal, came in that year or perhaps a little earlier. Soon after, the young Josiah began movements toward political independence. By 612 B.C. the Assyrian capital city of Nineveh had fallen to rebels, and efforts to reconstitute the Assyrian army were futile. Josiah was killed in battle in 609

B.C. in an attempt to keep an Egyptian army from moving north to Syria to support the remnants of the Assyrian army.³⁰ The year of Assurbanipal's death and the commencement of Jeremiah's prophetic career essentially coincide. Also, Josiah had recently begun an effort at religious reform, a theme dear to the heart of the biblical authors.³¹ The stage was thereby set for a tumultuous period in the ancient world, marked on the one hand by political chaos and destruction and on the other hand by the rise of prophetic figures like Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Ezekiel.

In Josiah's eighteenth year (622 B.C.), repairs at the Jerusalem temple complex brought to light a scroll of the "Law in the temple of the LORD" (2 Kings 22:8), a "covenant" document that proved to be a catalyst for a more thoroughgoing reform (2 Kings 23). Scholars have debated the identity of the scroll for years; since the description of Josiah's reforming efforts reflects the criticisms of the book of Deuteronomy regarding idolatry and polytheism, the best conclusion appears to be Deuteronomy or an earlier form of it. In spite of the prominence given Josiah by the biblical writers, it is not clear how successful (i.e., how thorough) his religious reforms actually were. Jeremiah's criticisms of the people during the reigns of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah indicate that those practices opposed by Josiah (and Deuteronomy) had not been eradicated. Perhaps in a perverse way, Josiah's untimely death contributed to their rebirth.

Jeremiah is not mentioned in 2 Kings or 2 Chronicles as a prophetic figure during Josiah's reform measures. The prophet's criticisms of Judean idolatry and polytheism (e.g., Jer. 2–3), however, leave no doubt that he agreed with the essential aims of the reform as presented in 2 Kings 23. Also, Jeremiah's commendation of Josiah (Jer. 22:15) indicates an appreciation of the king's moral stance.³²

When Josiah died, the "people of the land" (probably Judean landowners) made his son Jehoahaz king in his stead (2 Kings 23:30–33; 2 Chron. 36:1–4). Jehoahaz was not the oldest son, and after a three-month reign he was removed by the Egyptians in favor of his older brother Eliakim (2 Kings 23:34–37; 2 Chron. 36:4–8). They even changed his name to Jehoiakim at his accession. Apparently Jehoiakim represented a policy more in line with Egyptian wishes, whereas Jehoahaz may have preferred a more independent course like that of his father.

Jehoiakim reigned for eleven years (ca. 609–598 B.C.). Jeremiah opposed his policies completely. During Jehoiakim's reign his Egyptian handlers were defeated by the Babylonians in a decisive battle at Carchemish in northern Syria (summer, 605 B.C.). In the same year the Babylonian crown prince Nebuchadnezzar, who was the architect of the Egyptian defeat, succeeded his father on the Babylonian throne.³⁴

Babylon's rise to political power was a major shift in political relations for all the states in the region. During the years 604–601 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar campaigned in the west, taking cities on or near the Palestinian coast. In the winter of 604 Ashkelon was attacked and burned (cf. Jer. 36:9).³⁵ About this time or soon after, Jehoiakim paid tribute to Nebuchadnezzar and served three years as a Babylonian vassal. In the winter of 601/600 Egypt and Babylon fought a bloody and indecisive battle. Perhaps Jehoiakim rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar after the latter's battle with Egypt; in any case, the Babylonian king organized a campaign against Jehoiakim and Judah. With the Babylonians at the gate in Jerusalem, Jehoiakim died in December 598.³⁶

According to 2 Kings 24:8, Jehoiachin,³⁷ son of Jehoiakim, became king and ruled three months in Jerusalem. On March 16, 597 B.C.,³⁸ Jehoiachin surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar and was taken to Babylon along with thousands of other Judeans. He would stay there until his death. The last reference to him comes thirty-seven years later in the accession year of the Babylonian king Evil-Merodach (561 B.C.; 2 Kings 25:29–30; Jer. 52:31–34).³⁹

Nebuchadnezzar appointed Mattaniah, another son of Josiah, as the next "king" in Jerusalem (2 Kings 24:17; 2 Chron. 36:10–13). His reign lasted eleven years (ca. 597–586 B.C.). He was an uncle of the exiled Jehoiachin. Nebuchadnezzar changed Mattaniah's name to Zedekiah. Eventually Zedekiah conspired against Nebuchadnezzar (cf. Jer. 27) and then formally rebelled against him. In Zedekiah's ninth year, the Babylonian army again came against Judah and Jerusalem and laid siege to the city. A feeble attempt by the Egyptians to intimidate the Babylonians failed (Jer. 37:7–38:28), and in the eleventh year of Zedekiah's reign the city fell to the besiegers. Depending on one's reckoning, it was either August of 587 B.C. or, more likely, the same month in 586. Zedekiah was captured, blinded,

and taken to Babylon. The temple was looted, the city was burned, and thousands more were taken into exile.

For those who remained in the land, Nebuchadnezzar appointed Gedaliah as governor.⁴⁰ Gedaliah was from the family of Shaphan, who had been a high government official under Josiah. Shaphan's son Ahikam, Gedaliah's father, had supported Jeremiah after a disastrous sermon during the reign of Jehoiakim (Jer. 26:24). Jeremiah does not criticize Gedaliah the way that he did Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah. Gedaliah was assassinated by disaffected Judeans, and the curtain comes down on affairs in Palestine (Jer. 40–44).

Jeremiah's Place in the Last Years of the Judean State and Its Destruction

JEREMIAH WAS FROM a priestly family who lived just north of Jerusalem in the village of Anathoth. Centuries earlier the priest Abiathar was ousted by Solomon from his post in the royal administration and removed to Anathoth (1 Kings 2:26–27). It is likely, therefore, that Jeremiah and his family were exposed to many traditions of Israelite and Judean history. Nothing else is known about his family except that they were skeptical of his prophetic activity and some members conspired against him (Jer. 12:6; cf. 11:21).

As a young man during Josiah's reign, Jeremiah had a religious experience in which he was called to the prophetic office (Jer. 1). Associated with his call was an announcement of a threat to Judah from the north (1:14). The identity of the foe from the north is not revealed, although the image of the foe appears periodically in Jeremiah's oracles (e.g., 4:6; 5:15–17; 6:1–5). Scholars have debated its identity. Proposals include the Scythians, the Assyrians, or the Babylonians, depending on an early or late date assigned to Jeremiah's "call" and the nature of his early prophetic career. In any case, the threatening foe from the north is eventually seen to be Babylon, which arose to dominance in the region in 605 B.C.

Little in this book relates explicitly to the earlier years of Jeremiah's prophetic activity, although his preaching against idolatry and polytheism is complementary to the reforming efforts undertaken by King Josiah (see above). Jeremiah seems particularly influenced by the eighth-century prophet named Hosea, who also opposed idolatry and polytheism and who

understood the covenant between God and Israel to be like that of a marriage.⁴²

The majority of Jeremiah's dated prophetic oracles come in the reigns of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, uttered from 609 to 586 B.C. In these prophecies the corporate life of Judah is described and criticized. The political history sketched above is necessary for the interpretation of the prophet and his book, but it is primarily background material. It is the same for the narratives about Jeremiah. The political history is presupposed but often not cited directly. Readers are told, for example, that Jeremiah preached a difficult "sermon" at the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign (Jer. 26; cf. Jer. 7), but we are told nothing about the Egyptian appointment of Jehoiakim or of the tragic death of Josiah at the hands of the Egyptians. We are also told that Jeremiah was forbidden to preach at the temple complex (Jer. 36), but there is no direct reference to why the fifth year of Jehoiakim was significant for the message he preached.⁴³

More often the narrative accounts are concerned to tell about the suffering and rejection of Jeremiah rather than relating his persecution directly to the larger political horizon.⁴⁴ It is clear, however, that Jeremiah announced God's decisive judgment on Judah and Jerusalem through the historical agency of Babylon and its ruler, Nebuchadnezzar. History was not only the medium of revelation; it also produced the agent of God's judgment.

Jeremiah's circumstances in the first siege of Jerusalem in the winter of 598/597 B.C. are not known, although his opinion that the siege was divine judgment on Judah is made clear. Also clear is his opposition to the political policies, moral commitments, and spiritual sensibilities of Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah. He was convinced that Judah had not heeded the lessons of 598/597, so his message of judgment continued throughout his career. Particularly memorable were his wearing of a yoke to symbolize servitude to Babylon and his confrontations with Hananiah, a prophet who opposed him (Jer. 27–28).

Jeremiah was already under arrest by the order of King Zedekiah when the walls were breached by the Babylonians. This had not been his first encounter with Judean authorities, nor would it be the last time that his prophetic counsel was sought and then rejected. The Babylonian victors released him from imprisonment, and he briefly joined the circle of Judeans around Gedaliah at Mizpah. When Gedaliah was assassinated, Jeremiah and his scribal companion, Baruch, were taken to Egypt by a band of Judeans (Jer. 40–44).⁴⁵ They professed interest in his prophetic counsel but refused to follow it. There he continued to offer prophetic oracles, and (apparently) he, Baruch, and others collected his previous oracles. The reference to his presence in Egypt is the latest notice preserved about him in the book. Scripture offers no information about his last days and his death. Jeremiah, like most prophets, would be more influential in death than in life.

CHRONOLOGICAL CHART

Historical event	Date	Scripture
13th year of Josiah	627	Jer. 1:2
18th year of Josiah/discovery of book of the law	622	2 Kings 22
Fall of Nineveh	612	
31st year of Josiah/his death	609	2 Kings 22:1
3-month reign of Shallum/Jehoahaz	609	2 Kings 23:31
1st year of Jehoiakim (Egyptian appointee)	609	2 Kings 23:34–36
Battle of Carchemish/Nebuchadnezzar made king	605	
Babylonian threat against Judah and Jehoiakim, Daniel and others taken into exile	605	Dan. 1:1
Babylonian campaigns in Syria-Palestine	604– 601	
Destruction of Ashkelon by Babylonians	604	
Jehoiakim becomes a vassal of Babylon	604–	2 Kings

	603	24:1
Babylonian defeat on Egyptian border	601	
Jehoiakim revolts against Nebuchadnezzar	ca. 601	2 Kings 24:1
11th year of Jehoiakim/his death	598	
3-month reign of Jehoiachin in Jerusalem	597	2 Kings 24:8
Jerusalem besieged by Babylonians	598/597	2 Kings 24:10
Jerusalem surrenders/Jehoiachin and people taken in exile	597	2 Kings 24:12–16
Zedekiah/Mattaniah made king by Nebuchadnezzar	597	2 Kings 24:17–18
Regional conference in Jerusalem	ca. 594	Jer. 27
Zedekiah rebels against Nebuchadnezzar	ca. 594	2 Kings 24:20
Babylonians besiege Jerusalem	588	2 Kings 25:1; Jer. 39:1
Jerusalem falls in 11th year of Zedekiah	586	2 Kings 25:3–11
Gedaliah appointed governor by Babylonians	586	2 Kings 25:22
Gedaliah assassinated	586?	2 Kings25:25/Jer.41

Jeremiah and Baruch taken to Egypt	586?	Jer. 43
Another group taken in exile	582/581	Jer. 52:30
Jehoiachin released from house arrest	561	2 Kings 25:27
Babylon falls to Cyrus	539	cf. Ezra 1:1; Dan. 5:31

Aspects of Jeremiah's Theology

A THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS of the book of Jeremiah should concern itself primarily with what the book claims about God. To paraphrase a wise Bible teacher from the past: If someone thinks rightly about God, that person will be pointed in the right direction about any other matter. Thus, if we grasp the basic claims about God in the book of Jeremiah, we should gain some clarity about the other matters addressed in the book. We should not mistake the following sketches as substitutes for an extended examination of the biblical texts themselves or think that Jeremiah's theology can be reduced to a collection of ideas. Form and content go together.

As an indispensable part of Scripture, Jeremiah bears authoritative witness to the one God of creation, revealed consummately in Jesus Christ and known through the work of the Holy Spirit. The sketches that follow can only indicate in briefest fashion how Jeremiah contributes to the unfolding drama of God's self-revelation.⁴⁶

God As Creator

THAT GOD IS THE CREATOR of the world is assumed and confessed rather than argued (4:23–28; cf. the "echo" of Gen. 1:2 in Jer. 4:23; 10:12–16; 32:17; 51:15, 19). Three main lines of thought follow from this confession about God. (1) By virtue of being Creator, God is also the Lord of all nations. Jeremiah himself is called as a prophet to the "nations" (1:10), and his words are used by God not only to interpret history but in a mysterious way also to form events and historical processes. There are extended

oracles directed to and against other nations (chs. 46–51), where they are weighed in the moral balance and judged. There are universal standards to which God holds all nations accountable. Even Nebuchadnezzar is called God's "servant" (25:9) because God employs him to chastise his people; yet Babylon too will fall under God's righteous judgment. What moderns might call the "historical process" is a part of God's revelatory interplay with creation.

- (2) God is Lord of the processes that sustain or affect creation. God can send drought (14:1–6) as a sign of Judah's faithlessness. Clouds and wind serve him (4:11–13). Wild beasts serve as his rod of judgment (5:6). The constancy of night and day testify to his goodness (31:35–36; 33:25). Fertility is one of his gifts (31:27).
- (3) God can renew creation or bring something new to it. The enigmatic saying of 31:22 proclaims that God will create (*br*²) something new. God is like a potter who may rethrow the clay if not satisfied (18:1–11). The book of consolation (chs. 30–31) is predicated on the affirmation that God can restore the physical and spiritual conditions of his people. Within that corpus, the announcement of a new or everlasting covenant (31:31–34; 32:40) underscores the commitment of God to renew completely his relationship to his people and their relationships with one another. A provisional fulfillment of these hopes comes with the restoration of a remnant from Babylonian exile. It is a foretaste of grander reconciliation yet to come.

In all these things the book of Jeremiah plays a role in the biblical depiction of God as Creator.⁴⁷ For the most part, creation is simply assumed as the arena of God's self-revelation, so that Jeremiah advances little that is new or distinctive. The main thrust of the book is to apply the belief in God as Creator and Lord to the issues facing the people of Judah and Jerusalem. In the third point noted above, Jeremiah prepares for the broader eschatological horizon revealed in the New Testament. God has promised to make all things new!

God Calls Israel to His Service

GOD CHOSE ISRAEL (through its ancestors) as a recipient of his covenant ($b^e rit$) and his gracious loyalty (hesed). Israel was called out of Egypt (7:22; 11:4; 23:7–8). God's choice of and resulting bond with Israel

comprise the essence of *his* covenant (*berit*; 11:1–7; 31:31–32). Jeremiah will never describe the covenant as Israel's; it belongs to God and is extended as a gift to Israel. Marriage is a metaphor for the covenant (2:2–3; 31:32), as is the family image of the people as the Lord's "house" (12:7–9). As God's "chosen," Israel owes God exclusive worship and wholehearted obedience. Through the prophet, God often designates Israel/Judah as "my people."⁴⁹

All of Jeremiah's criticism of the people for their failures is predicated on the two convictions that God had chosen Israel as his people and expected loyalty and obedience on their part (cf. 22:9). The corporate failure of Israel/Judah, complete with all its institutions and leadership, is the dominant theme of this book. That failure, however, can only be understood in light of the presupposition of a gracious covenant given to them and subsequently broken by them.

God calls leaders to serve his people. The prophet calls them shepherds (2:8; 3:15; 23:1) and watchmen (6:17), since God has entrusted the education and care of the people to them. More specifically the leaders are kings and princes, priests, prophets, and wise men. Monarchs in Judah are descended from David and occupy David's seat (22:2). As such the kings and princes are recipients of God's promises to David's "house," and they are called to uphold justice and righteousness (21:11–12; 22:1–30). Priests are responsible to instruct the people in matters of faith and to act as mediators between God and the people in sacrificial service (2:8; 5:31; 18:18). The priesthood is the recipient of a covenant from God (33:21). Prophets provide the people with God's word (2:8; 18:18; 23:9–40) and communicate his will. When rightly engaged in ministry, they are God's "servants" (7:25; 25:4). Insight is a gift from God, and the wise who perceive the truth should offer counsel (18:18).

A fundamental assumption of Jeremiah's judgmental prophecies is that the leadership of the people had been in the forefront of corporate failure. Monarchy, priesthood, and prophecy all stood against him and diverted the people away from God's word through the prophet to them. Nevertheless, after judgment God's resolve to bless included a new David (23:5–6; 33:19–22), a renewed priesthood (33:19–22), and faithful prophets like Jeremiah (and Uriah, 26:20–23). In the broader unfolding of God's revelation, Christ becomes the culmination of the promises to David's

house, the ministries of the priesthood, and the prophetic work among God's people.⁵¹

As an Old Testament book, Jeremiah's emphases are corporate, institutional, and political. Theological analysis comes in and through these emphases. They are the primary ways in which Jeremiah addresses the matter of ecclesiology, that is, the doctrine of God's people and their life before him. From the covenant graciously given to Israel, later readers can extrapolate a way of understanding the Christian church as yet another and later corporate form of God's people. Judah and Israel represent an earlier type of the corporate identity of God's people.

Jeremiah also points to the broader biblical theme of the remnant. Even where there is chaos and massive failure (as in the prophet's day), there was also a remnant saved by grace. This paradigm shows itself time and again in the unfolding historical drama of redemption, from the family of Noah saved from the Flood down through the pages of church history.

God Gives Gifts to Sustain His People

A COROLLARY TO the confession that God chose Israel as his people and delivered them from Egyptian bondage is the confession that God guided the people through the desert and granted them land (2:7). Israel's settlement in the land of Canaan was actually a settlement in God's earthly inheritance (naḥala; so 2:7). As God's inheritance it was not Israel's to do with as they pleased; instead, Israel honored the gift of the land by serving God while in it (12:7–9). The great polemic in Jeremiah against the defiling nature of Israel's (and Judah's) sin should be seen against the background of God's call to Israel to live a life of holiness in God's heritage. Exile was, in a sense, the cleansing of the land as well as judgment on its inhabitants for their failure.

Within his heritage God provided two centers of holiness, both of which mediated divine presence and guidance to the people. The first was the city of Jerusalem. In line with the affirmation of the Psalter that God had chosen Jerusalem/Zion (Ps. 78; 132; Jer. 2:2), Jeremiah assumes a special role for the city. Jerusalem was metaphorically God's daughter,⁵² the object of God's tender affection and mercy. Jerusalem/Zion was also the location of the temple (the second center of holiness, located in Jerusalem). Characteristically it is referred to as "the LORD's house" or "the house,

which bears my Name."⁵³ The perversion of Jerusalem and the temple was a result of the people's sinfulness, aided and abetted by their leaders. It is in the context of Judah's perversion of these good gifts that the language of divine anguish and anger reaches it peak.

If it is true that a common and corporate perversion leads to judgment, it is also true that God's resolve to restore is such that people, Jerusalem, and the temple all had a place in the future beyond exile. The claim of God's everlasting covenant with the priests (33:19–22) presupposed the restoration of the temple. Sacrifices and gifts of thanksgiving would be offered again (33:11). Jerusalem (31:38–40) too would be rebuilt as part of the remnant's return from exile.

Beyond the postexilic period and the unfolding drama of the Old Testament witness, the restored temple becomes the occasion for a new word about Christ as the fleshly temple-presence of God (John 2:13–22). Jerusalem serves as a symbol of the true home of Christians (Gal. 4:21–5:1; Rev. 21–22), and the land-as-God's-inheritance is transformed into Christian adoption as sons (and daughters) and heirs of God's eternal glory (Rom. 8:14–17). Jeremiah's words, therefore, about Jerusalem, land, and inheritance serve as signposts along the way toward the unveiling of the gospel. His words should not be used as evidence for any modern claims with respect to the state of Israel, the current predicament regarding Jerusalem, or the fate of Arab Palestinians.

God As Unique Among the Gods

JEREMIAH CONTAINS POLEMICAL language against polytheism, idolatry, and syncretism on the part of God's people (e.g., Jer. 2:20–28). The book assumes that God's covenant with the people forbids the worship of other deities, as the first two commandments of the Decalogue assert (Ex. 20:2–6; Deut. 5:6–10).⁵⁴

In common with other Old Testament books, Jeremiah contains polemic against Canaanite deities known as Baal.⁵⁵ This title was used for popular weather and fertility deities in Canaan. In the middle of the ninth century the worship of Baal in Israel provoked a crisis in Israel and occasioned the prophetic ministry of Elijah (1 Kings 18–21). Hosea likewise polemicized against Baal deities in the middle of the eighth century. Jeremiah's own critique is similar to and probably influenced by Hosea. Both the singular

and plural form of the title Baal occur in Jeremiah, along with slur-like comparisons for the deity, such as shame and worthless.⁵⁶

There seem to have been several related problems with Baal deities. Some people in Israel wanted to use the title for the God of Israel (cf. Hos. 2:18 [Eng. 2:16]) or, similarly, assumed that the Lord was just like a Baal deity. Others wanted to worship both the Lord and Baal as part of their polytheistic worldview. There was a grain of truth in the identity of the Lord as Baal, for the God of Israel was indeed concerned about fertility and rain. What gets rejected in the witness of the Old Testament are the overt sexual terms associated with divine procreation, gender identity for the deity, and the a/immoral acts associated with fertility cults.

Jeremiah notes also that some Judeans worshiped the Queen of Heaven (Jer. 7:17–19; 44:15–19). She too was likely known by a personal name (perhaps Astarte or Asherah) as well as by her title. The emphasis of her devotees in chapter 44 is that she provided better care than the Lord (see comments on ch. 44). Most likely she was also venerated for her supposed powers of fertility. According to 17:2, some Judeans worshiped Asherim, a plural term the NIV translates as "Asherah poles." The singular form of the term is Asherah (cf. 2 Kings 23:4–6).

Rituals associated with child sacrifice are referred to in a place known as the Topheth (Jer. 7:30–32; 19:5; 32:35). Two different deities are named as recipients; Baal and Molech. Since Molech, like Baal, is a title⁵⁷ and not a personal name, it is not at all clear whether one deity or more was involved in the cult. The Topheth was located in a valley just south of the temple area in Jerusalem, so it is possible that some participants associated the Lord with these sacrifices in spite of the Lord's vehement protests otherwise (e.g., 7:31).

Jeremiah mentions a number of deities worshiped by other peoples with whom Judah had contact. Among them are Egyptian, Ammonite, Moabite, and Babylonian deities. These are often mentioned in prophecies of judgment to come upon "their" people, a judgment brought about by the Lord, the God of Israel. There is even mention on occasion of those people or territories being restored—again as an indication that God is the Lord of all creation and the processes of history. Jeremiah contains no real discussion over the question of the existence of these deities. It is simply

assumed that they have no influence over the fate of Judah or on the Lord's activity within the orders of creation.

According to Jeremiah, therefore, the Lord God of Israel has no rival in the divine world, and his people have no need to worship any other deity. To put it in a colorless phrase, Jeremiah represents God as both unique and comprehensive in person and scope. God's *uniqueness* does not translate necessarily into the affirmation that God is utterly different from human conceptions of other deities. The true concerns of religion, any religion, will find an appropriate counterpart in the *comprehensiveness* of the Lord. If, for example, the sacrifice of children in Canaan was for the personal crises of families or to express devotion to Molech/Baal, then a proper counterpart in nonhuman sacrifice was available to those who wanted to worship the Lord. For those families enacting fertility rites or praying to Baal for rain, there was an appropriate counterpart in the merciful care of the Lord. As Jeremiah put it in an unforgettable phrase: The Lord is a "spring of living water" (2:13; 17:13) for those who trust in him.

The other deities of Jeremiah's time play a role analogous to the "principalities and powers" unmasked by the apostle Paul. They provide historical illustration from the period of the "old covenant" of the broad biblical teaching: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3). Jeremiah's strictures against other deities are also timely warnings applicable in any age, given the human tendency to "hedge one's bets" or to divide one's allegiance among several powers as a safety precaution. The book claims (and rightly so!) that the Lord is sufficient for all the needs of his people and that there is self-incurred danger in worshiping other powers.

Outline of Jeremiah

I. Judgment and Hope (Jer. 1–25)

- A. Call of Prophet (ch. 1)
- B. Corporate Failures Identified (chs. 2–6)
- C. Sermon at Temple (7:1–8:3)
- D. Corporate Failures Identified (8:4–10:25; 13:12–14:22)
- E. Sermon on Covenant Breaking (11:1–17)
- F. Threats to Prophet and His Laments (11:18–12:17; 15:11–21; 16:14–17:27; 18:13–23; 20:7–18)
- G. Signs of Judgment
 - 1. Loincloth (13:1–11)
 - 2. No Prayer (15:1–10)
 - 3. No Marriage (16:1–13)
 - 4. Potter (18:1–12)
 - 5. Broken Pots (19:1–15)
 - 6. Prophet in Stocks (20:1–6)
 - 7. Basket of Figs (ch. 24)
- H. Judgment on Leaders (chs. 21–23)
- I. Nebuchadnezzar and Exile (ch. 25)

II. Judgment and Hope (Jer. 26–52)

- A. Narratives about Judean Failures (26–28)
- B. Letter to First Wave of Exiles (ch. 29)
- C. Hope and Consolation (chs. 30–33)
- D. Oppression of Slaves (ch. 34)
- E. Sign of the Rechabites (ch. 35)
- F. Writing and Burning of First Scroll (chs. 36; 45)
- G. Narratives During and After the Final Siege of Jerusalem (chs. 37–44)

- H. Oracles About and Against Other Nations, Including Babylon (chs. 46–51)
- I. Rehearsal of Jerusalem's Fall and Note of Jehoiachin's Release (ch. 52)

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Text and Commentary on Jeremiah

Jeremiah 1:1–3

THE WORDS OF Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. ²The word of the LORD came to him in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah, ³and through the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, down to the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah son of Josiah king of Judah, when the people of Jerusalem went into exile.

Original Meaning

LIKE MOST PROPHETIC books, Jeremiah begins with a superscription (i.e., a heading) indicating the time of the prophet's ministry. Dates in Judah were reckoned in accordance with the reign of a monarch, a common procedure in the ancient world. As noted in the introduction, the forty plus years given for Jeremiah's ministry (ca. 627–584 B.C.) cover some of the most tumultuous and tragic events of the nation's history. Included among them were rebellions against foreign control, the death of Judean kings at the hands of foreign powers, the demise and virtual destruction of the nation itself, and the forced descent of the prophet into Egypt in the aftermath of the destruction.

Jeremiah was from a priestly family of Anathoth, a village about three miles north of Jerusalem, the capital city of Judah. Anathoth was part of the Benjamite inheritance and assigned as a Levitical city (Josh. 21:18).² It was also the home of the priest Abiathar, who centuries earlier had served David faithfully but who had backed Adonijah, Solomon's brother and rival for the throne, at David's death. Anathoth became the home in exile of Abiathar (1 Kings 2:26), and thus Jeremiah's hometown likely had deep roots in the priestly and Levitical traditions of the nation, providing the future prophet with an education suited to his task.

King Josiah attempted to free Judah from the control of Assyria and to set Judah on the road to spiritual reform. His thirteenth year coincides with the demise of Assyria's last strong king Assurbanipal and probably also includes his initial steps to alter Judah's politically subservient and religiously degenerate path. The eleventh year of Zedekiah is among the most somber in all of biblical history. Jerusalem was captured and destroyed by the Babylonians, Zedekiah himself was seized and blinded, and many Judeans were taken into exile by their captors (Jer. 52; cf. 2 Kings 25).

Bridging Contexts

JEREMIAH'S MINISTRY IS embedded in the convulsive events leading to Judah's tragic demise. This is typical of the timely nature of biblical prophets and the books that record their work. The heading to the book also bears a significant cultural marker: Time itself is reckoned according to the regnal years of a Davidic monarch. Eventually much of the world will adopt a chronological scheme that is dated to the birth of a descendant from David's line, that is, Jesus of Nazareth. These Davidic kings in Jeremiah 1:1–3, therefore, are in a chosen line of great significance; nevertheless, each of them failed in varying degrees to lead God's people from the paths of syncretism and idolatry.

The search for the original meaning of biblical prophecy is based on the conviction that the words and deeds of a prophet first address the pressing issues of a prophet's own day. Indeed, Jeremiah's life story is a reflection of the pain of Judah's failure, and his own suffering mirrors that of the people. But the very fact that a book of Jeremiah is still being read after 2,500 years is evidence that it was intended to instruct later readers through its portrayal of past events and its predictions of God's transforming moments to come. By God's grace and in light of subsequent biblical revelation, readers are also invited to find new light coming forth from the same words of the prophetic book, reflecting the transcendent quality of God's Word and his intention to instruct all generations of his people in the twin contexts of their common humanity and their inheritance among the saints.

Scripture provides additional contexts in which to place the words of Jeremiah. In the Old Testament the prophetic books of Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Nahum, and Ezekiel address audiences whose life spans overlap with those first addressed by Jeremiah. Previous prophetic models in

Scripture include the accounts of Elijah and the prophecies of Amos, Isaiah, Micah (cf. Jer. 26), and Hosea. The covenant and Torah about which the prophet will speak are subjects well known to his audience. Whether they grasped the significance of either is debatable. Jeremiah certainly regards their adherence to them as inadequate!

The prophecy of Jeremiah not only interprets the significance of historical events; it offers specific judgments on corporate failure and includes promises that God would see the people through their self-generated demise in order to heal the consequences of their failures. This pattern of historical judgment and redemption in Jeremiah is intended as more than a historical report about the past; it is also typological and analogical instruction for later generations, who are to see themselves corporately addressed as God's people of their day.

Contemporary Significance

ACCORDING TO APOSTOLIC preaching, God "has not left himself without testimony" (Acts 14:17). The manner of God's self-revelation varies according to divine discretion. Jeremiah's historical rootedness is testimony to one facet of God's revelation, a timely witness intended not only for the generation to which it was first delivered but for subsequent generations as well. Jeremiah the prophet and the book called by his name are chosen vessels, brought forth in specific contexts, to communicate God's timely truth.

The prophetic superscription reflects a form of incarnational theology. Just as God's supreme revelation was his Word become flesh in Jesus Christ, so God's Word took historical form in the life of Jeremiah and acquired written form in a book. It is by consideration of God's revelation through the prophet Jeremiah and in his book that subsequent generations of God's people continue to find divine instruction.

For the people of God, the timely nature of Jeremiah's ministry takes on the primary character of corporate address, inviting the church to consider God's judging and redeeming activity within the historical process. For individual reflection, Jeremiah's words provide testimony that God uses both people and events to further his purposes and to instruct the faithful.

Jeremiah 1:4–19

THE WORD OF THE LORD came to me, saying,

5"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."

6"Ah, Sovereign LORD," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child."

⁷But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. ⁸Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD.

⁹Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "Now, I have put my words in your mouth. ¹⁰See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."

¹¹The word of the LORD came to me: "What do you see, Jeremiah?"

"I see the branch of an almond tree," I replied.

¹²The LORD said to me, "You have seen correctly, for I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled."

¹³The word of the LORD came to me again: "What do you see?"

"I see a boiling pot, tilting away from the north," I answered.

¹⁴The LORD said to me, "From the north disaster will be poured out on all who live in the land. ¹⁵I am about to summon all the peoples of the northern kingdoms," declares the LORD.

"Their kings will come and set up their thrones in the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem; they will come against all her surrounding walls and against all the towns of Judah.

16I will pronounce my judgments on my people because of their wickedness in forsaking me, in burning incense to other gods and in worshiping what their hands have made.

¹⁷"Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them. ¹⁸Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. ¹⁹They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD.

Original Meaning

THE REST OF chapter 1 contains an account of Jeremiah's call and appointment to prophesy (1:4–10), followed by two divine oracles (1:11–12 and 1:13–19) assuring the prophet that God is with him as he delivers a judgmental word to Judah.

Jeremiah's call is cast in poetic form. Verse 5 has paired phrases indicating that God's decision to use Jeremiah came prior to his birth. The phrase translated in the NIV as "set apart" is a rendering of the Hebrew verb qdš, whose basic meaning is to be holy. Holiness can be a property, like clean or unclean, and it can be related to ethical activity and spiritual

dedication; but the term assumes that what God designates as holy is reserved for (i.e., set apart for) a particular task. Otherwise said, God's choice of Jeremiah, his designation of him as prophet, is the reason he is sanctified. It is not the other way around, as if Jeremiah's moral and spiritual attributes are the impetus for God's selection of him as prophet.

Verse 5 concludes with the affirmation that God has appointed Jeremiah a "prophet to the nations." Jeremiah's protest that he is too young and inexperienced is countered by God's assurances to be with Jeremiah, to deliver him, and to place his words in Jeremiah's mouth. Each of these assurances is a way to define a prophet. He or she is designated by God for a task and is granted his presence and guidance, and what is spoken by the prophet is God's word for the occasion in which it is given.

In the call's conclusion, verse 10 offers an elaboration on the phrase "prophet to the nations," with the comment that Jeremiah's appointed activities are to tear down and to overthrow as well as to build and to plant. How might this young man become a prophet to the nations, since Jeremiah holds no political office and his words to kings are widely ignored? It seems that, in reality, Jeremiah's "appointment" describes the function of the words God gives him to deliver. A prophet's defining is functional: When the words from God do what they are called to do, they define what it is to be a prophet.

Through oracles the prophet will announce in the Lord's name that nations will be judged and found wanting, that these nations will be overthrown by the Lord, and that beyond the judgment to fall on Judah as part of this process, the Lord will rebuild his people and replant them in the Promised Land. Jeremiah becomes a prophet to the nations by virtue of what he says, not through a job given him in Jerusalem or by popular vote. The book of Jeremiah does not offer a generic definition of what it means to be a prophet; instead, it describes who Jeremiah will be as the prophet to his generation.

The verbs of 1:10 describe succinctly what Jeremiah's words will do. They will tear down much that his audience believes, and only after the terrible toll of Judah's failures has been reckoned will his positive words begin to build up and plant. These verbs appear later in the book (12:14–17; 18:7–10; 24:4–7; 42:10; 45:4), although not all six of them together.

Tearing down and building up is a leading motif in this book as it presents the prophet to readers and hearers.

The first oracle of assurance (1:11–12) is a pun in Hebrew. The Hebrew word for almond tree sounds like the Hebrew verb to watch (cf. NIV note). The almond tree becomes a sign to Jeremiah that God is watching over his word to bring it to fulfillment. This is another way to define the work of a prophet. The prophet is called to obedience, and God is responsible for using the word for his own purposes.

The second oracle (1:13–19) concerns the effects of an overturned pot of boiling liquid. The pot is a metaphor for the threat to come on Jerusalem and Judah because of the people's disobedience. There is also an initial reference to those who will oppose Jeremiah (v. 19); there will be much more in the book about them. Finally, the repetition of the assurance from verse 8 reminds the reader that God will be with Jeremiah to deliver him from his opponents. As the book will eloquently display, Jeremiah is not immune from human suffering or doubt; his security does not reside in his cleverness or physical stamina, but in the fact that God is with him.

Bridging Contexts

THE CALL OF Jeremiah to a prophetic ministry has similarities to other accounts of persons called into God's service. These similarities are no doubt intentional and communicate a pattern to both ancient and modern readers. God prevails on Moses in spite of the latter's objections (Ex. 3:1–15), assuring Moses that he will be with him. Ezekiel swallows a scroll given him through divine revelation (Ezek. 2:1–3:11), clearly a sign that the prophetic words to come forth from his mouth have divine origin. Jeremiah 1:9 makes a similar point where the Lord touches Jeremiah's mouth and declares: "I have put my words in your mouth" (cf. Isa. 6:1–8). Human frailty (e.g., youth or difficulty in speech) is no excuse before God's expressed will to grant a person the words to say and the opportunities to deliver them.

Elements of this commissioning pattern can be seen in the New Testament as well. The risen Christ declares to his first followers that they are to teach his word to other disciples and that he will be with them until the end of the age (Matt. 28:18–20). The apostle Paul perceives his own life

in light of God's call and even more particularly describes God as One who has set him apart from his mother's womb in order to preach Christ among the Gentiles (i.e., non-Jewish nations; see Gal. 1:13–17). There are clear parallels between Paul's autobiographical description and the prophetic model of Jeremiah, set apart from his mother's womb to be a prophet to the nations. John the seer is told by the risen Christ to write a prophecy in a book and not to fear the persecution to come (Rev. 1:9–19). The human fears and frailties common to those who are called are not ultimately barriers to their service because God has declared he will be with them.

Undergirding the commissioning pattern is the electing work of God, who sets people apart in order to use them as messengers of his Word. They are chosen on behalf of others. This is a primary implication of what is meant by "election" in the Bible: A person or persons are chosen by God in order to affect the lives of others. Such an emphasis should keep later readers from speculating unduly about Jeremiah's personal characteristics or his psychological make-up (how he "felt" about his experience). The account of his call is given primarily to persuade people about the significance of the material that follows his call.

Contemporary Significance

GOD'S CALL. THE account of God's call to Jeremiah is not meant as a model of God's call to believers in the sense that we should all seek an experience with God like that of Jeremiah. Instead, Jeremiah's call is narrated first of all to tell prospective readers why they should have any interest in the words that follow. Believers are asked to trust Jeremiah's experience of God as instructive for them. Jeremiah is a chosen vessel, set apart before his birth, to deliver God's words concerning the nations of his day. Jeremiah's book likewise is a chosen vessel intended for the instruction of later generations. His call and commissioning come at the beginning of the book to indicate what kind of message and what kind of authority the book contains.

God does not call all believers to be prophets; some, however, are called to engage in prophetic activity, and all are called to trust the efficacy of the prophetic word in Scripture. Two related elements in Jeremiah 1 have continuing significance for understanding prophetic activity: dependence on God for vindication rather than popularity among one's contemporaries, and the likelihood that such activity will result in opposition. Old and New Testament alike indicate that prophets face strong opposition from their contemporaries, that they owe the preservation of their words (and even their very lives) to God, and that future generations will often look on them differently from their own generation.

The value of human life. The account of God's call of Jeremiah is also relevant to the contemporary debates over abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, and the "value of human life." Let's admit, of course, that the account of Jeremiah's call is not intended initially as a polemic against abortion or euthanasia, nor does the text answer all the complicated questions facing modern societies over these and related issues. Nevertheless, Jeremiah is known to God even before his conception, and his preparation for prophetic work begins before his birth. Thus even in the womb Jeremiah is valued. Furthermore, the account assumes that God is the author of Jeremiah's life and the One who shapes his historical destiny in spite of his reluctance.

These claims do function as powerful confessions that human life is God's gift and subject to God's discretion—more particularly, that the womb is the home of a person known to God. In Jeremiah's case, his bitterness over treatment by his contemporaries and even his frustration with his treatment by God eventually lead him Job-like to curse the day of his birth (20:14–18; cf. 15:10) and to think that his life is worthless. God, of course, would not agree that Jeremiah's life is worthless. Nevertheless, God's call of Jeremiah and the assurance of protection does not mean that Jeremiah is spared the humiliation that often goes with the prophetic office or self-doubt; on the contrary, God's power is made manifest through his human weakness.

Jeremiah is not being called to judge the effectiveness of his work or the significance of his life. He is called to deliver God's word; God will see to its effectiveness as well as to the vindication of Jeremiah's life in ways he himself will never see. In God's good but inscrutable providence, this can be the experience of the saints in any generation. God not only works his will through their words and deeds, but he also uses their lives to touch future generations in ways the saints themselves would not know.

The following account of a convicted criminal was passed along to me by a friend engaged in prison ministry. This criminal, a relatively young man in his late twenties, had been the product of a broken home. Actually, he was born out of wedlock and learned early on that he was not particularly wanted by either his mother or his father (the latter he hardly even knew). After landing in prison for violent criminal activity, he was led by the grace of God, along with the sincere efforts of some lay Christians, to realize that he had been called by God, first to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ and then to a form of ministry to other inmates in prison. Part of his emotional and spiritual healing came in the tearful realization that God had called him and set him apart for the task of ministry. For him this meant that God wanted him, even if his biological parents did not, that God had set him apart for a task, and therefore that God would be with him as he carried out his new-found call.

In the case of this inmate, his incarceration did not end with his newly formed faith. He hoped his time in jail would end so that he could do some form of ministry, but then saw instead his incarceration as the place where God had put him and as the place where God would be with him in the difficulties (and joys!) ahead. One of his first tasks was to learn study habits, so that he might retain more effectively the things he read in the Bible and present them more effectively.

Jeremiah 2:1–37

THE WORD OF the LORD came to me: ²"Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem:

"'I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert, through a land not sown.

3 Israel was holy to the LORD, the firstfruits of his harvest; all who devoured her were held guilty, and disaster overtook them," declares the LORD.

⁴Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, all you clans of the house of Israel.

⁵This is what the LORD says:

"What fault did your fathers find in me, that they strayed so far from me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves.

They did not ask, 'Where is the LORD, who brought us up out of Egypt and led us through the barren wilderness, through a land of deserts and rifts, a land of drought and darkness, a land where no one travels and no one lives?'

⁷I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce. But you came and defiled my land and made my inheritance detestable. ⁸The priests did not ask, 'Where is the LORD?'

Those who deal with the law did not know me;

the leaders rebelled against me.

The prophets prophesied by Baal, following worthless idols.

⁹"Therefore I bring charges against you again,"

declares the LORD.

"And I will bring charges against your children's children.

¹⁰Cross over to the coasts of Kittim and look,

send to Kedar and observe closely; see if there has ever been anything like this:

11 Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they are not gods at all.)

But my people have exchanged their Glory for worthless idols.

¹²Be appalled at this, O heavens, and shudder with great horror," declares the LORD.

13"My people have committed two sins:
They have forsaken me,
the spring of living water,
and have dug their own cisterns,
broken cisterns that cannot hold
water.

¹⁴Is Israel a servant, a slave by birth? Why then has he become plunder?

15Lions have roared; they have growled at him.

They have laid waste his land;
his towns are burned and deserted.

¹⁶Also, the men of Memphis and Tahpanhes have shaved the crown of your head.

¹⁷Have you not brought this on yourselves by forsaking the LORD your God when he led you in the way?

¹⁸Now why go to Egypt to drink water from the Shihor?

And why go to Assyria to drink water from the River?

¹⁹Your wickedness will punish you; your backsliding will rebuke you.

Consider then and realize
how evil and bitter it is for you
when you forsake the LORD your God
and have no awe of me,"

declares the Lord, the LORD Almighty.

20"Long ago you broke off your yoke and tore off your bonds; you said, 'I will not serve you!'
Indeed, on every high hill and under every spreading tree you lay down as a prostitute.

²¹I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock.

How then did you turn against me into a corrupt, wild vine?

²²Although you wash yourself with soda and use an abundance of soap, the stain of your guilt is still before me,"

declares the Sovereign LORD.

23"How can you say, 'I am not defiled;
I have not run after the Baals'?
See how you behaved in the valley;

consider what you have done.

You are a swift she-camel running here and there,

²⁴a wild donkey accustomed to the desert, sniffing the wind in her craving— in her heat who can restrain her?

Any males that pursue her need not tire themselves;

at mating time they will find her.

²⁵Do not run until your feet are bare and your throat is dry.

But you said, 'It's no use!
I love foreign gods,
and I must go after them.'

²⁶"As a thief is disgraced when he is caught,

so the house of Israel is disgraced—they, their kings and their officials, their priests and their prophets.

²⁷They say to wood, 'You are my father,' and to stone, 'You gave me birth.'

They have turned their backs to me and not their faces;

yet when they are in trouble, they say, 'Come and save us!'

²⁸Where then are the gods you made for yourselves?

Let them come if they can save you when you are in trouble!

For you have as many gods as you have towns, O Judah.

²⁹"Why do you bring charges against me? You have all rebelled against me," declares the LORD.

³⁰"In vain I punished your people; they did not respond to correction.

Your sword has devoured your prophets like a ravening lion.

³¹You of this generation, consider the word of the LORD:

"Have I been a desert to Israel or a land of great darkness? Why do my people say, 'We are free to roam; we will come to you no more'?

32Does a maiden forget her jewelry, a bride her wedding ornaments?

Yet my people have forgotten me, days without number.

³³How skilled you are at pursuing love! Even the worst of women can learn from your ways.

³⁴On your clothes men find the lifeblood of the innocent poor, though you did not catch them breaking in.

Yet in spite of all this

35you say, 'I am innocent; he is not angry with me.'

But I will pass judgment on you because you say, 'I have not sinned.'

36Why do you go about so much, changing your ways?

You will be disappointed by Egypt as you were by Assyria.

³⁷You will also leave that place with your hands on your head, for the LORD has rejected those you trust; you will not be helped by them.

Original Meaning

CHAPTER 2 IS a collection of Jeremiah's undated poetic utterances, and as the first collection of oracles presented in the book, it also serves as an introduction to his public speaking. (Jeremiah 1:4–19, though intended ultimately for readers as well, is addressed directly to Jeremiah.) Perhaps it is helpful to think of these oracles in chapter 2 as a "sampler," since the topics taken up reappear time and again in his book. The primary themes are about Judah's defection from following the Lord and the importance of maintaining obedience to his revealed will. The same basic themes continue into chapter 3.

It is clear from the Hebrew text that chapter 2 alternates the manner in which the audience is addressed. Unfortunately English words do not offer a similar kind of specificity in translation because the English pronoun "you" can refer to masculine singular, feminine singular, and corporate entities, whereas these are all differentiated in Hebrew. As a result, at some points readers cannot tell from the translation of the NIV when the identity of the addressee has shifted. In fact, the NIV does not always render the different Hebrew pronouns literally, as the following outline will show. It is important to recall, however, that the change in addressee used by the prophet is for poetic effect. The people of Judah and Jerusalem are the real audience, regardless of the poetry or metaphor being used by the prophet.

- A. 2:1–2 address Jerusalem (cities are personified as female in Hebrew) as the bride of the Lord.
- B. 2:3 refers to Israel. To keep the continuity with the address to Jerusalem as bride, the NIV refers to Israel as "her" in verse 3, even though the Hebrew text follows the grammatical shift to masculine Israel and uses "him."
- C. 2:4–13 is for the people who are addressed with a plural "you."
- D. 2:14–16 continues the address to Israel (cf. B).
- E. 2:17–25 shifts the address back to Jerusalem (cf. A). The NIV translates "yourselves" in verse 17, even though the Hebrew text has the feminine singular "you."
- F. 2:26–32 addresses Israel and Judah, both of which are corporate designations of the people.

G. 2:33–37 addresses Jerusalem again (cf. A). The Hebrew text has the feminine singular "you."

Readers can see from the outline above that the collected oracles in chapter 2 vary the way the people are addressed. Since gender roles in the ancient world influence the way that poetry and metaphor characterize an entity, it is necessary to keep in mind the alternation listed above.

2:2–3. Jerusalem is reminded of her beginnings as the young bride of the Lord. Here the gender role of the poetry is significant. Cities are personified as female in Northwest Semitic cultures (of which Israel was a part). Jerusalem represents the people, just as Washington, D.C., or Beijing represent respectively the Unites States of America and the People's Republic of China. It is her gender that provides the metaphor of Jerusalem as the bride of the Lord.

Verse 3 switches abruptly to address the people by their covenant name "Israel," even though Israel is grammatically masculine singular. The combined imagery of 2:2–3 is that of Israel's devotion to and dependence on the Lord for both identity and sustenance. It recalls by inference the exodus from Egypt into the desert, the covenant ceremony at Mount Sinai, and God's sustaining of his people in the arid desert. This period of intimacy is contrasted with the estrangement from God depicted for Jeremiah's contemporaries in the rest of the chapter.

2:4–13. Israel is defined here inclusively (i.e., in covenantal terms, not political terms) as "my people" (2:13; i.e., the people of God). Note the double address as "house of Jacob" and "clans of the house of Israel." Corporately Israel is accused of having defected from its first love in order to pursue "worthless idols," that is, other deities. Baal, a popular Canaanite deity, is named specifically in verse 8.

Also in verse 8 Jeremiah singles out Judah's leadership for particular criticism (cf. 2:26). It is leadership of a particular kind. "Priests" had the sacred task of interpreting God's presence and will among the people and having facility with Torah (NIV "law"). The word translated as "leaders" is more literally rendered as "shepherds." God, who is the great Shepherd of his people, demands that the leadership of the people share in this shepherding role. Finally, the "prophets" are singled out for their perfidy in seeking inspiration from Baal rather than the Lord.

The Lord's historic faithfulness in the events of Exodus, desert wandering, and entry to the Promised Land (2:6–7) is contrasted with the emptiness of Baal and other idolatries. Succinctly stated: "My people have exchanged their Glory for worthless idols" (v. 11) and have committed two evils: They have rejected the Lord and attempted vainly to support themselves (v. 13). The image of broken cisterns in verse 13 is telling, since the care of cisterns was a laborious job in the hill country of Palestine, where earthquake tremors occurred periodically. Jeremiah compares the labor-intensive work of repairing cisterns with the idolatry of following other gods, whereas the Lord is a fountain of living water.

- 2:14–19. These verses are addressed to two entities, each of whom represents the people. Verses 14–16 speak directly of "Israel," and the "you" of verses 17–19 is addressed to Jerusalem. The tragic example of Israel (here, the northern kingdom) serves to highlight the precarious position of Jeremiah's contemporaries in Judah. The defection from Yahweh shows itself institutionally in the political realm as Judah has become entangled with Egypt and Assyria (for historical details, see the introduction). This indictment presupposes a close relationship between an idolatrous and false worship on the one hand, and a disastrous political agenda on the other. Just as Judah seems willing to trust any deity in the Canaanite pantheon, so the state seems willing to grasp at straws in an attempt to save itself by making deals with Egypt and Assyria. Verse 19 predicts that Judah's wicked acts will also be the measure of its judgment.
- 2:20–25. Because of their defection from the Lord, the people are depicted through a personification of Jerusalem as a prostitute. By analogy she/they are also like animals in heat who are unrestrained in seeking a mate. The valley mentioned in verse 23—where the people seek the Baals—is likely the Valley of Hinnom, which runs on the southern and western sides of the city of Jerusalem. It is also the probable site of child sacrifice to Molech or Baal (see also 7:30–34).
- 2:26–32. In matters of religious devotion, Jeremiah describes the people as calling on other gods through the symbols of trees and stones, with Judah having as many gods as towns (vv. 26–28). Perhaps the prophet employs sarcasm in his description of the wood as father and the stone as mother, for he reverses a widespread symbolic understanding in polytheism. In fertility cults, a tree is often the symbol of female fertility and a stone (in the form

of a pillar; Heb. *massebot*) the symbol of male fertility. The consequences are severe: The Lord has rejected those forces in which Judah has put its trust.

In verses 29–32 the prophet carries on a dialogue or dispute with the people. Apparently some among them have accused God of negligence, while God, through the agency of prophets, has accused the people of defection—which earlier in the chapter was described as prostitution. The people are also accused of forgetting God. Modern readers should not take this charge as implying that memory or recognition of God has faded in Judah. Forgetting is associated with not honoring God or with being disobedient, just as remembering is associated with doing what is expected. If one "remembers," one will act appropriately; thus, forgetting is tantamount to an inappropriate or nonresponsive act.

2:33–37. Jerusalem is again addressed, now personified as a prostitute or an adulteress. Verse 34 understands the prostitution as more than a defection from the worship of the Lord. The image is that of blood spattered on a garment, blood from innocent people whose lives have been consumed by the adulterous activities of Jerusalem. This adds the element of what can be called social criticism. Injustice and unrighteousness also flow from a defective understanding of who the Lord is and what he desires from his covenant partner.

The final image is that of personified Jerusalem walking away with her hands on her head. This is the posture of mourning and resignation, and it probably refers to the posture used by captives who are being led away. The activities of Jerusalem are leading to unpleasant consequences. Those entities (e.g., Assyria, Egypt) in whom she has trusted will be unable to help her in time of need.

Bridging Contexts

A "SAMPLER" ROLE. The thrust and tenor of these prophetic oracles are common to the book of Jeremiah. They possess two characteristics that define their particular role in the book: their placement at the beginning of Jeremiah's words to his audience, and their profile as corporate address to the people as a whole. Both characteristics are important for interpretation. Like an introductory paragraph for an essay, Jeremiah's initial words set the

tone and substance of what follows. The fact that dates for the oracles are lacking suggests that the chapter is intended to "paint with a broad brush" and to function as a "sampler," a term used in the previous section to describe the role of this collection. The overall thrust of the oracles is to paint God's people in their totality as rebellious against the Lord, who brought them into existence.

The mortal folly of the people is a constant theme of Jeremiah's public ministry. In keeping with the corporate nature of the address, the critique has to do with social institutions, political choices, and national character—that is, those things that make the audience a particular people. It is also a thoroughly theological analysis, reflecting Jeremiah's judgmental words to God's covenant partner. This is not just any state or group of people but those defined by election and covenant. Their fundamental identity is not that of a state but of a community of the Lord's people, who also have a political shape to their corporate existence.

God's people yesterday and today. The specifics of Judah's situation do not need exact replication among God's people in another time and place for them to be relevant to the faithful. Certainly God's people today should read the criticisms (and the expectations) of ancient Israel and ask if they apply to them, but the essential point is covenantal and ecclesiological. These oracles question the fitness of Judah to serve as God's covenant partner; they question the validity of the people's identity as the beloved bride of the Lord. A congregation, a church body, can hear this text question their own role as God's people.

In all parts these utterances assume the identity of Jeremiah's audience to be the people of God. This identity is the common element with Jerusalem (v. 2), the house of Jacob and all the clans of Israel (v. 4), and Judah (v. 28). It takes precedence over the various political forms Israel or Judah might take. God declares the audience to be "my people" (v. 13); through their ancestors they became God's bride (v. 2), rescued from Egypt (v. 6) and given a place in God's land (v. 7). They began as holy to the Lord (v. 3), set apart for his service. They originated as a choice vine (v. 21), selected for the fruit they would bear (cf. Isa. 5:1–7).

Spurning the Lord from the heart. The text also assumes the faithlessness of God's people at that time to their *formative identity*. By their actions they have defiled God's land (v. 7), ignored his teaching (v. 8),

and sought the protection of other deities (vv. 26–28). Instead of acting like a faithful spouse, they have prostituted themselves (vv. 20–25), frantically seeking protection from other gods or a political advantage through diplomatic intrigue (v. 36). This rejection of God is couched in *personal terms*. The failure to be obedient is also the rejection of an intimate relationship. One sees this in the anguished query of verse 29: "Why do you bring charges against me?" It is the basis of the charge in verse 13, "My people ... have forsaken me," and the incredulity of verse 32, "My people have forgotten me."

Readers who conclude that Judah is accused only of not following God's instructions or making unwise political decisions have missed the most important claim here. It is not the failure to maintain an external norm that is at the heart of the criticism—though disobedience to God's revealed will is primary to the criticism; rather, it is the astounding claim that the Lord himself has been spurned, that the "spring of living water" himself has been rejected by the people in a foolhardy attempt to redefine themselves. One discerns the pain of rejection and anger over infidelity in the divine voice infusing the text. Such is the intensity of emotion where God has lost an intimate partner to the seductions of alien suitors, who will be unable to support her.

Contemporary Significance

THE SHAPE OF LIFE. Such a critique of the life of God's people invites every generation of his people to reexamine its own commitments. As is common with the prophetic critique, the criticisms in Jeremiah 2 do more than explain what was wrong in Jeremiah's day; they also intend to ask subsequent generations to examine the corporate nature of their life and witness.

This can be done in various ways. A church or Christian fellowship ought to ask if the shape of its life portrays some of the failings of Judah, perhaps in more subtle forms than a blatant idolatry or overt polytheism. Since the church is not identical with a state, the problem may not be alliances with a modern Egypt or Assyria, but the seeking of security and advantage among social and political forces may be detrimental to the church's life.

In the United States, for example, churches are often invited (tempted?) to make alliances for gain or influence. Conservative churches may unite with a Republican or a politically conservative figure (e.g., Jerry Falwell) and more liberal churches with a Democrat or a more politically liberal figure (e.g., Jesse Jackson). Thus in political campaigns collections are taken up in congregations. The question here is: Who is using whom? Are not both parties using the other? Is it possible that there will be long-term pain for short-term gain in these alliances? The answer may not be simple or obvious, but it is important to ask the questions of primary identity and covenant loyalty.

Contemporary idolatry. What makes idols worthless? The short answer is that they are not divine and they cannot save! Idols are a substitute for the real thing; they may be attractive and appealing to people with heightened religious longings. Idols offer theological rewards, but they cannot save. One of the fascinating (and scary) things about Jeremiah's day was the fervor with which his contemporaries sought to be religious, as if more religious activities and devotion to more deities would usher in a more secure future.

Among some non-Western churches, idolatry and animism may be real issues with which to struggle. I have observed this matter firsthand in Africa, where there is much debate about reincorporating indigenous religious customs among churches. Western missionaries who brought the gospel to the continent also taught that many of the indigenous customs (e.g., dancing, polygamy, ancestor veneration, witchcraft) were wrong. In some respects these missionaries were more "Western" than "Christian," but in other respects they were correct to oppose pagan practices. Among most Western Christians, idolatry is just as pernicious as in Jeremiah's day, but the objects of attachment are more symbolic and subtle in nature.

It is frequently observed that people in Western society who do not worship the triune God are often not without religious activities and other fundamental commitments. Instead of believing in nothing, they are tempted to believe a little in everything in their search for "solutions." Technology and individual "do-it-yourself" spirituality are two seductions facing Western Christians.

The stock markets of developed countries are good examples of a kind of secular polytheism in the modern world. Money, fervor, and alliances

follow the trail of power and economic productivity. It is a remarkably amoral endeavor. One switches allegiances (i.e., investments) quickly in the search for profit. There are no lasting commitments other than immediate benefit. This can be a similar logic to that of combined polytheism and political machinations castigated by Jeremiah.

The name of modern counterparts to ancient polytheism is legion, for they are many (Mark 5:9). As public acceptance of traditional Judeo-Christian standards continues to erode, the growth of "new" religions and an emphasis on generic spirituality in contemporary society are nothing short of phenomenal. Without a firm foundation from which to proceed in important matters, people are tempted to commit themselves to a variety of ventures. It appears risky to trust all things to one Lord and more prudent to diversify. Monotheism has always appeared risky to some and narrow to others, whether in Jeremiah's day or ours. Contemporary Christianity faces a genuine threat from cultural forces like generic spirituality, which seeks to water down or dilute orthodox piety. It is now common in certain Christian circles to incorporate prayers to the great spirit or the mother goddess and to downplay the uniqueness of the gospel in favor of a more generic religiosity.

Polytheism in contemporary Western life may manifest itself in subtle ways, as when people compartmentalize fundamental issues, look to experts (theological and otherwise) who advise on their specialties, and refuse to see their lives as interconnected wholes before a sovereign God. Christians are not immune either from the temptations of self-help, which may lead them astray from devotion to their true Lord.

Living water. The New Testament builds on the theme of God as a fountain of living water (Jer. 2:13). Jesus informs the Samaritan woman that he can give her "living water ... welling up to eternal life" (John 4:10, 14). To any who believe in him, Jesus declares that "streams of living water" will proceed from them (7:38). To reject his claim is to reject the offer of life that only God can grant. This is the same dynamic of Jeremiah's own day but put in a Christological context.

Jeremiah 3:1–4:2

1"If a man divorces his wife and she leaves him and marries another man, should he return to her again? Would not the land be completely defiled? But you have lived as a prostitute with many lovers would you now return to me?" declares the LORD. ²"Look up to the barren heights and see. Is there any place where you have not been ravished? By the roadside you sat waiting for lovers, sat like a nomad in the desert. You have defiled the land with your prostitution and wickedness. ³Therefore the showers have been withheld. and no spring rains have fallen. Yet you have the brazen look of a prostitute; you refuse to blush with shame. ⁴Have you not just called to me: 'My Father, my friend from my youth, ⁵will you always be angry? Will your wrath continue forever?' This is how you talk, but you do all the evil you can."

⁶During the reign of King Josiah, the LORD said to me, "Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under

every spreading tree and has committed adultery there. ⁷I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it. ⁸I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed adultery. ⁹Because Israel's immorality mattered so little to her, she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood. ¹⁰In spite of all this, her unfaithful sister Judah did not return to me with all her heart, but only in pretense," declares the LORD.

¹¹The LORD said to me, "Faithless Israel is more righteous than unfaithful Judah. ¹²Go, proclaim this message toward the north:

"Return, faithless Israel,' declares the LORD,
 'I will frown on you no longer,
for I am merciful,' declares the LORD,
 'I will not be angry forever.

13 Only acknowledge your guilt—
 you have rebelled against the LORD
 your God,
you have scattered your favors to foreign gods
 under every spreading tree,
 and have not obeyed me,'"
 declares the LORD.

¹⁴"Return, faithless people," declares the LORD, "for I am your husband. I will choose you—one from a town and two from a clan—and bring you to Zion. ¹⁵Then I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and

understanding. ¹⁶In those days, when your numbers have increased greatly in the land," declares the LORD, "men will no longer say, 'The ark of the covenant of the LORD.' It will never enter their minds or be remembered; it will not be missed, nor will another one be made. ¹⁷At that time they will call Jerusalem The Throne of the LORD, and all nations will gather in Jerusalem to honor the name of the LORD. No longer will they follow the stubbornness of their evil hearts. ¹⁸In those days the house of Judah will join the house of Israel, and together they will come from a northern land to the land I gave your forefathers as an inheritance.

¹⁹"I myself said,

"'How gladly would I treat you like sons and give you a desirable land, the most beautiful inheritance of any nation.'

I thought you would call me 'Father' and not turn away from following me.

²⁰But like a woman unfaithful to her husband,

so you have been unfaithful to me, O house of Israel,"

declares the LORD.

²¹A cry is heard on the barren heights, the weeping and pleading of the people of Israel,

because they have perverted their ways and have forgotten the LORD their God.

²²"Return, faithless people; I will cure you of backsliding."

[&]quot;Yes, we will come to you,

for you are the LORD our God. ²³Surely the idolatrous commotion on the hills and mountains is a deception; surely in the LORD our God is the salvation of Israel. ²⁴From our youth shameful gods have consumed the fruits of our fathers' labor their flocks and herds, their sons and daughters. ²⁵Let us lie down in our shame, and let our disgrace cover us. We have sinned against the LORD our God. both we and our fathers; from our youth till this day we have not obeyed the LORD our God."

4:1"If you will return, O Israel, return to me,"

declares the LORD.

"If you put your detestable idols out of my sight and no longer go astray,

2and if in a truthful, just and righteous way you swear, 'As surely as the LORD lives,'
then the nations will be blessed by him and in him they will glory."

Original Meaning

THIS SECTION IS comprised of various oracles, both poetic and prose, concerned with the faithless acts of Israel and Judah, their folly in rejecting

the Lord, and calls for the people to repent. They are not given any precise setting in Jeremiah's own life, and as a continuation of the theme of prostitution from chapter 2, they likely represent samples of public proclamation from more than one period in Jeremiah's prophetic work. There are several rhetorical plays on the Hebrew word *šub* (turn, return, repent) in the section that provide a thematic link to the prophecies.

The manner in which the audience is addressed varies in this collection, as it did in chapter 2. The following outline presents the "figures" of speech that comprise those addressed. An underlying metaphor is the identity of the people as members of the Lord's household or family. Thus they can be depicted as "Jerusalem," as the "spouse" or covenant partner of the Lord, as unfaithful sisters who are "married" to the Lord, and as children who have rebelled against the dictates of the Lord, the head of the household.

- A. 3:1–5. Following the last section of chapter 2, the opening figure in chapter 3 is Jerusalem.
- B. 3:6–10. This prose section represents "faithless Israel" and "unfaithful ... Judah" as adulterous sisters.
- C. 3:11–13. Israel (i.e., the adulterous northern kingdom) is addressed in a poetic oracle in verses 12b–13.
- D. 3:14–18. The people, scattered because of their sinfulness, are addressed as God's children and called to resettle the area of Judah and Jerusalem.
- E. 3:19–20. Jerusalem is addressed (the "you" in Hebrew is feminine singular).
- F. 3:21–22a. The people are addressed as wayward children from the house/family of the Lord.
- G. 3:22b–25. The people, personified as prodigal children, offer a liturgy of repentance.
- H. 4:1–2. The voice of the Lord concludes this section with a statement about repentance.
- **3:1–5.** Jeremiah uses the relationship of a husband and his divorced wife as an analogy of the relationship between the Lord and his disobedient

covenant people. Jerusalem is the female personification of the people; that is, she is the feminine "you" castigated in 3:1. The analogy builds on the claims of 2:2, where the relationship between the Lord and his people is compared to the marriage relationship.

This passage also presupposes the instruction of Deuteronomy 24:1–4 concerning divorce and remarriage. That text from the Torah raises the question whether a woman once married but then divorced and married to another man, can then remarry her "first husband." The answer is *no*. Although the text offers no other reason than that the wife has become "defiled" to the first husband, the scenario likely presupposes some other factors not stated explicitly in forbidding the remarriage. It is not necessary to go into these other factors, since the important thing is the answer given in Torah, an answer presupposed in the rhetorical question of Jeremiah 3:1.

The question in 3:1, "Should [a former husband] return to [his wife] again after she had married another?" contains the first use of the verb šub in this section. As noted above, the answer is no. Jerusalem, representing the people of Judah, is the spouse who has married many lovers in her defection from the Lord. As a result she is in a defiled state, estranged from her first husband and incapable of mending the relationship. The language of verse 2 contains a Hebrew term so uncompromising and harsh in its depiction of adultery that the scribes who compiled the Masoretic Text provided a substitute word to be used in public reading. The NIV choice of "ravish" catches something of the physical and offensive nature of the term, but it is acceptable for public reading.

Jeremiah uses both rhetorical questions and accusations to engage his audience. Obviously the charge of flagrant prostitution and adultery is offensive to the people, as is the conclusion that once "divorced," the people are unable on their own to effect a reconciliation.

3:6–10. In this prose section, perhaps compiled as an interpretive comment for readers of the poetic oracle in 3:1–5, the fate and infidelity of Israel are compared to the (worse) circumstances of Judah. Israel and Judah are described as sisters who have both committed adultery against their spouse (cf. Ezek. 16:44–58; 23:1–49).² The adjective "faithless" used for Israel is *m*^ešuba, a form of the verb šub and a part of the wordplay on the concept of turning/repenting. Literally, one could translate the phrase as

"turning Israel," as if she is constantly turning this way and that in seeking lovers.

Surprisingly, Judah has learned nothing from the fall of Israel to the Assyrians (cf. 2 Kings 17). Josiah was a reforming king (2 Kings 22–23), whose covenant renewal measures were good but short-lived and ultimately inadequate. Elsewhere Jeremiah expresses admiration for Josiah (Jer. 22:15–16). Judah did not return (*šub*) "with all her heart" to the Lord. Such language reflects Deuteronomy 6:5 and the renewal ceremony of 2 Kings 23:3.³

3:11–13. The Lord calls faithless Israel to return (*šub*) to the Lord. This oracle is preserved as part of an autobiographical section, beginning with: "The LORD said to *me*" (3:11). The oracle is directed explicitly to the north; that is, it is intended for remnants of the former northern kingdom. God promises to be gracious and receptive, foregoing the anger proper to a spurned spouse. Although no date is given for this oracle, it probably fits early in Jeremiah's prophetic ministry, during the time when King Josiah made overtures to remnants of the covenant people in the territory of the former northern kingdom (cf. 2 Kings 23:15–23; 2 Chron. 35:1–19). The prophet will also evidence a concern for these Israelite remnants in the hopeful prophecies in Jeremiah 30–31.

3:14–18. The analogy of Judah as an adulterous wife is here changed to that of wayward rebellious children; both analogies are part of a root metaphor that identifies the people as comprising part of the household of the Lord. The NIV attempts to keep the metaphor of marriage by translating the Hebrew term for master/owner as "husband." The passage begins with an address to children, however, and not to a personified entity who plays the role of spouse (as in 3:1–5 and somewhat differently in 3:6–10). It assumes a form of exile and resulting loss of land. Restoration, therefore, is concrete. The Lord will bring back the prodigal children and establish them in their homeland.

These verses contain a vision in prose of restoration in the land of promise. One way to grasp the significance of the ark of the covenant is its portrayal as the throne (or royal footstool) of the cosmic Lord. Yet in the future, in a renewed Jerusalem, no one will long for the lost ark because the whole city will be "The Throne of the LORD." Remnants from both Israel and Judah will inhabit the city and surrounding land. Even other nations

will come to the city (cf. Isa. 2:1–5). This restoration will come about even though the initial passage of the section (Jer. 3:1) assumed that according to the Torah, "remarriage" was impossible.

- **3:19–20.** Both the marriage ("unfaithful wife") and familial metaphors (children able to inherit) are again used to indicate Judah's sin. The covenantal term "house of Israel" is also used to describe the people.
- **3:21–25.** The language of "returning" (*šub*) and of healing the people's "faithlessness" and "backsliding" are used in the promises of these verses. The metaphor of the people as wayward children is employed in verse 22. They offer confession of sin and repentance in 3:22b–25. Apparently the passage depicts a state of affairs to come after the judgment of the Exile.
- **4:1–2.** When that time comes, God calls for a sincere return (*šub*) to him. The future restoration of God's people will lead other nations into finding a blessing in the Lord. This last element plays on the foundational promise of Genesis 12:3, that all the nations of the earth will find a blessing in Abraham's descendants.

Bridging Contexts

Punishment and repentance. As noted above, only a general reference to Josiah (Jer. 3:6) provides a context in Jeremiah's own life, and it is likely that in this section we have prophecies from different stages in the prophet's ministry, all linked by the common themes of Israel and Judah's failure to return to their Lord. The artful collection of these prophecies is already an example of "bridging contexts," designed for recipients of Jeremiah's book. In their original contexts, these oracles indicated the nature of Israel and Judah's failures and the consequences to come. For readers/hearers they indicate why Israel and Judah fell to foreign nations: God was judging his people for their failure to turn to him in true worship and heartfelt obedience.

Punishment for infidelity was inevitable. But beyond that, restoration and healing required a wholehearted return to the Lord. Perhaps this section reflects a development in Jeremiah's message over the decades of his ministry; as a result of calls for corporate repentance, Jeremiah learns that Judah is inherently unable to change her ways. Although this makes judgment on the people unavoidable, it is not the last word. God himself

will bring about change among his people and thus offer a new beginning for future generations.

In this section we have no facile preaching of repentance, as if one simply calls the people to change, and by their own efforts they do so. Judah appears heedless of the danger to its existence, taking no instruction from the failure (and exile) of her sister Israel (3:6–7). The first passage (3:1–5) indicates the impossibility of Judah's return to the Lord because she has "married" many lovers in her apostasy, and the Torah (Deut. 24:1–4) makes remarriage an impossibility. In other words, the essential point of judgment is that Judah will not only not "return" but will finally be unable to return to the Lord.

This arrangement of oracles is designed to bridge contexts from the initial audience of Jeremiah to that of subsequent generations, who will read and reflect on the justified demise of Judah. Each generation of God's people is asked to account for Judah's fall as the inevitable consequence of apostasy, resulting in the Lord's righteous judgment. Moreover, each generation is asked to search its own life to see where changes need to be made. Gracious words about the future are a reminder that God is committed to the transformation of his people.

Jesus' public ministry too was marked by explicit calls for repentance (e.g., Matt. 4:17) and reminders of the cost of discipleship. In these actions Jesus brought a major element of prophecy under the old covenant to its culmination. Like Jeremiah, Jesus' call for repentance was not about change for change's sake but for the sake of knowing God and the joy of obedience to his revealed will. Like Jeremiah, Jesus spoke to a generation of God's people who had heard the word of the Lord but who had not responded. Moreover, Jesus' proclamation too was ignored by some and heard by others, with a result that the audiences of both would become examples for generations to come. Finally, like the proclamation of Jeremiah to his audience (3:22), Jesus taught that what God demands by way of repentance and reorientation is something he graciously enables, "because the Lord disciplines those he loves" (Heb. 12:6).

Healing and restoration. In addition to righteous judgment on Israel and Judah for their faithlessness, this section is also about healing and future restoration that only God can provide. Note the emphasis on divine activity: "I will choose ... [I will] bring ... I will give ... I will cure" (Jer. 3:14–15,

22). As everywhere in the Bible, so here too God is the author of salvation. His depiction of restoration is a corporate one because the judgment indicated in these prophecies is a corporate one. Jerusalem is to be repopulated and become the center of divine revelation for all (cf. Isa. 2:2–4; Mic. 4:1–3). Ezekiel, Jeremiah's younger contemporary, likewise has an expansive concluding section to his book where in visionary style he portrays Jerusalem as the holy city and medium of divine revelation (Ezek. 40–48). And John, the seer and prophet of the risen Christ, beholds the heavenly Jerusalem as the eternal home of the redeemed from every generation of God's people (Rev. 21–22), where the Lamb dwells, and death is no more.

One encounters in these prophecies, therefore, two elements in particular that remain instructive to subsequent generations. The first is the call to turn to the living God and recognize the consequences of failure to do so. The second is the prophetic depiction that God will heal the consequences of his people's failures and restore them again in the land promised to their ancestors. When portions of the exilic community returned to Judah and Jerusalem during the Persian period, it was understood as a fulfillment of Jeremiah's prediction that God would restore his people (cf. Dan. 9:2). Yet that return did not exhaust the significance of the prophecy, as later Old Testament prophets and New Testament writers demonstrate.

These oracles, taken as a whole, give a radical witness to the freedom and grace of God. Legal custom forbade the remarriage of a husband and wife, once the wife had been divorced and gone to marry another man. That law is used here to demonstrate the impossibility of Israel and Judah's removing the effects of their sinfulness by simply deciding to do better and return to their first Lord. That same law, however, will not keep *God* from healing the people from his side. It is important to note that his "overrule" of the Torah does not make the law bad or its principles invalid. The better analogy is the Pauline claim that what the law could not do, God has seen fit to do—all for the sake of those he loves (cf. Rom. 8:1–4).

Contemporary Significance

THE VIEW OF THE HUMAN CONDITION. Jeremiah's words should evoke reflection in our hearts. We begin with God's view of the human condition.

God formed his people in order that they might have an intimate and exclusive relationship with him (note the analogy of Jeremiah, along with Hosea, of marriage/family). Behind this assumption of an exclusive bond lie the claims of divine choice, the "first" commandment of the Decalogue ("you shall have no other gods before me," Deut. 5:7), and the "great" commandment ("love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength," Deut. 6:5; cf. Mark 12:29–30).

Christians are the bride of Jesus Christ, God's Son. Christ's disciples are bound to him through his resurrection, and the working of the Holy Spirit is present within them and the church, the corporate body of Christ. Disobedience ("sin") is not just failure to observe a norm of behavior, but the breaking of a bond and an affront to one's Lord. Adultery in theological terms is a crime against grace; it is infidelity against God who in Christ has called us into an intimate fellowship and who has formed a church as the holy bride of Christ.

Judgment is the inevitable consequence of failure to turn to the Lord in faith and obedience. Human beings cannot have it both ways: Either one is on intimate exclusive terms with God through Jesus Christ, or one has other gods—other things that capture one's commitments and ultimate allegiance. In Israel's case, God judged them by giving them over to the other lords they seemed to desire (i.e., other "deities," the freedom of immorality, and historical deliverance through political alliances). Communal destruction and exile were the result. Christian reflection should begin with a search for those things that seduce believers from allegiance to Christ, things of a personal nature and a corporate nature. What is it, for example, about modern Western society that pulls Christians from their relationship with Christ and robs them of the joy of obedience to their Lord? What things in our lives, both personal and corporate, should be seen as warning bells announcing that not all is right in Zion? Are there not signs that warn that failure has consequences?

Repentance. Jeremiah's repeated use of the term *šub* urges exploration of the nature and function of repentance in the Christian life. There are rich resources in the history of Christian piety on this subject. Fasting, self-denial, acts of charity, and spiritual disciplines such as *lectio divina* and frequent prayer have all been classical means for turning and returning to the Lord. But repentance first of all means turning from an activity toward

God and engaging in obedience to his revealed will. In Christian terms it is not just the rejection of sinful activity but the embracing of the good revealed in Jesus Christ.

Repentance may go on to mean self-renunciation, the setting aside of idols, rejection of evil deeds, and a turning from worldly values (all classical characteristics). It also includes the positive steps of discipleship. Peter urged his hearers to "repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord. ... When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways" (Acts 3:19, 26). Repentance is not just a listing of vices to be avoided but the positive movement toward a new life in Christ. Repentance is not simply an act that occurs at the beginning of Christian discipleship, something in Christian experience to be relegated to the past, but a way of life, a mark of discipleship.

Repentance not only has the embrace of God as its goal; it has God as its author. Thus, repentance is not only an event and an act of the will; it is also a process, a positive lifestyle, through which God matures and strengthens his children. If Jeremiah can call on Judah to return to the Lord, he can also proclaim that God will cure Judah's sickness and overcome its chronic infidelity. The judgment of the Exile will lead to the new beginning of restoration. Similarly, the judgment of the cross ushers in the transformation of resurrection. An acknowledgment of a sinful estate is the first step in the turning toward the living God, who makes all things new.

The unveiling of God's character. Within the repeated call to Judah to turn resides the promise that God will do what the divine law (Deut. 24:1–4) says is legally impermissible: to restore a sinful spouse who has apostatized and legally married another. It is a profound theological claim that God's ability to restore is not limited by human inability to heal broken relationships. Even the Deuteronomic law regulating divorce—when read prophetically—points to the God of grace beyond human culpability and its consequences. In New Testament terms, even the curse of the law on disobedience is born by God's Son in order that the blessing promised to Abraham can be received through faith (Gal. 3:13–14). What the law weakened by human fallibility cannot do, God has done in Jesus Christ.

Jeremiah 4:3-6:30

THIS IS WHAT the LORD says to the men of Judah and to Jerusalem:

"Break up your unplowed ground and do not sow among thorns.

4 Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem, or my wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done—burn with no one to quench it.

5"Announce in Judah and proclaim in Jerusalem and say:
'Sound the trumpet throughout the land!'
Cry aloud and say:
'Gather together!
Let us flee to the fortified cities!'

6Raise the signal to go to Zion!
Flee for safety without delay!
For I am bringing disaster from the north,

⁷A lion has come out of his lair; a destroyer of nations has set out.
He has left his place to lay waste your land.
Your towns will lie in ruins without inhabitant.
⁸So put on sackcloth,

even terrible destruction."

⁸So put on sackcloth, lament and wail,

for the fierce anger of the LORD has not turned away from us.

9"In that day," declares the LORD,
"the king and the officials will lose heart,
the priests will be horrified,
and the prophets will be appalled."

¹⁰Then I said, "Ah, Sovereign LORD, how completely you have deceived this people and Jerusalem by saying, 'You will have peace,' when the sword is at our throats."

¹¹At that time this people and Jerusalem will be told, "A scorching wind from the barren heights in the desert blows toward my people, but not to winnow or cleanse; ¹²a wind too strong for that comes from me. Now I pronounce my judgments against them."

13Look! He advances like the clouds,his chariots come like a whirlwind,his horses are swifter than eagles.Woe to us! We are ruined!

¹⁴O Jerusalem, wash the evil from your heart and be saved.

How long will you harbor wicked thoughts?

¹⁵A voice is announcing from Dan, proclaiming disaster from the hills of Ephraim.

16"Tell this to the nations, proclaim it to Jerusalem:

'A besieging army is coming from a distant land,

raising a war cry against the cities of Judah.

¹⁷They surround her like men guarding a field, because she has rebelled against me," declares the LORD.

18"Your own conduct and actions have brought this upon you.
This is your punishment.
How bitter it is!
How it pierces to the heart!"

19Oh, my anguish, my anguish!
I writhe in pain.
Oh, the agony of my heart!
My heart pounds within me,
I cannot keep silent.
For I have heard the sound of the trumpet;
I have heard the battle cry.
20Disaster follows disaster;
the whole land lies in ruins.
In an instant my tents are destroyed,
my shelter in a moment.

²¹How long must I see the battle standard and hear the sound of the trumpet?

22"My people are fools;
they do not know me.
They are senseless children;
they have no understanding.
They are skilled in doing evil;
they know not how to do good."

²³I looked at the earth,
and it was formless and empty;
and at the heavens,
and their light was gone.
²⁴I looked at the mountains,
and they were quaking;

all the hills were swaying.

25I looked, and there were no people; every bird in the sky had flown away.

26I looked, and the fruitful land was a desert; all its towns lay in ruins before the LORD, before his fierce anger.

²⁷This is what the LORD says:

"The whole land will be ruined, though I will not destroy it completely.

28 Therefore the earth will mourn and the heavens above grow dark, because I have spoken and will not relent, I have decided and will not turn back."

29At the sound of horsemen and archers every town takes to flight.
Some go into the thickets; some climb up among the rocks.
All the towns are deserted; no one lives in them.
30What are you doing, O devastated one? Why dress yourself in scarlet and put on jewels of gold?
Why shade your eyes with paint? You adorn yourself in vain.
Your lovers despise you; they seek your life.

31I hear a cry as of a woman in labor,
 a groan as of one bearing her first
 child—
 the cry of the Daughter of Zion gasping for breath,

stretching out her hands and saying, "Alas! I am fainting; my life is given over to murderers."

5:1"Go up and down the streets of Jerusalem, look around and consider, search through her squares.

If you can find but one person who deals honestly and seeks the truth, I will forgive this city.

²Although they say, 'As surely as the LORD lives,' still they are swearing falsely."

³O LORD, do not your eyes look for truth? You struck them, but they felt no pain; you crushed them, but they refused correction.

They made their faces harder than stone and refused to repent.

⁴I thought, "These are only the poor; they are foolish,

for they do not know the way of the LORD, the requirements of their God.

⁵So I will go to the leaders and speak to them;

surely they know the way of the LORD, the requirements of their God."

But with one accord they too had broken off the yoke and torn off the bonds.

⁶Therefore a lion from the forest will attack them, a wolf from the desert will ravage them.

a leopard will lie in wait near their towns to tear to pieces any who venture out, for their rebellion is great and their backslidings many.

7"Why should I forgive you?
Your children have forsaken me
and sworn by gods that are not gods.
I supplied all their needs,
yet they committed adultery
and thronged to the houses of
prostitutes.

⁸They are well-fed, lusty stallions, each neighing for another man's wife.

⁹Should I not punish them for this?" declares the LORD.

"Should I not avenge myself on such a nation as this?

10"Go through her vineyards and ravage them,
but do not destroy them completely.
Strip off her branches,
for these people do not belong to the LORD.

11 The house of Israel and the house of Judah have been utterly unfaithful to me," declares the LORD.

12 They have lied about the LORD; they said, "He will do nothing!
No harm will come to us; we will never see sword or famine.
13 The prophets are but wind and the word is not in them; so let what they say be done to them."

¹⁴Therefore this is what the LORD God Almighty says:

"Because the people have spoken these words. I will make my words in your mouth a and these people the wood it consumes. ¹⁵O house of Israel," declares the LORD, "I am bringing a distant nation against you an ancient and enduring nation, a people whose language you do not know, whose speech you do not understand. ¹⁶Their quivers are like an open grave; all of them are mighty warriors. ¹⁷They will devour your harvests and food, devour your sons and daughters; they will devour your flocks and herds, devour your vines and fig trees. With the sword they will destroy the fortified cities in which you trust.

¹⁸"Yet even in those days," declares the LORD, "I will not destroy you completely. ¹⁹And when the people ask, 'Why has the LORD our God done all this to us?' you will tell them, 'As you have forsaken me and served foreign gods in your own land, so now you will serve foreigners in a land not your own.'

20"Announce this to the house of Jacob and proclaim it in Judah:
21 Hear this, you foolish and senseless people,

who have eyes but do not see, who have ears but do not hear:

²²Should you not fear me?" declares the LORD.

"Should you not tremble in my presence?

I made the sand a boundary for the sea, an everlasting barrier it cannot cross.

The waves may roll, but they cannot prevail;

they may roar, but they cannot cross it.

²³But these people have stubborn and rebellious hearts;

they have turned aside and gone away.

²⁴They do not say to themselves, 'Let us fear the LORD our God, who gives autumn and spring rains i

who gives autumn and spring rains in season,

who assures us of the regular weeks of harvest.'

²⁵Your wrongdoings have kept these away; your sins have deprived you of good.

26"Among my people are wicked men who lie in wait like men who snare birds

and like those who set traps to catch men.

27Like cages full of birds,
their houses are full of deceit;
they have become rich and powerful
28 and have grown fat and sleek.
Their evil deeds have no limit;
they do not plead the case of the fatherless to win it.

they do not defend the rights of the poor.

²⁹Should I not punish them for this?" declares the LORD.

"Should I not avenge myself on such a nation as this?

30"A horrible and shocking thing has happened in the land:

31The prophets prophesy lies, the priests rule by their own authority, and my people love it this way.

But what will you do in the end?

6:1"Flee for safety, people of Benjamin!
Flee from Jerusalem!
Sound the trumpet in Tekoa!
Raise the signal over Beth Hakkerem!
For disaster looms out of the north,
even terrible destruction.

²I will destroy the Daughter of Zion, so beautiful and delicate.

³Shepherds with their flocks will come against her; they will pitch their tents around her, each tending his own portion."

4"Prepare for battle against her!
Arise, let us attack at noon!
But, alas, the daylight is fading,
and the shadows of evening grow long.
5So arise, let us attack at night
and destroy her fortresses!"

⁶This is what the LORD Almighty says:

"Cut down the trees

and build siege ramps against Jerusalem.

This city must be punished; it is filled with oppression.

⁷As a well pours out its water, so she pours out her wickedness.

Violence and destruction resound in her; her sickness and wounds are ever before me.

⁸Take warning, O Jerusalem, or I will turn away from you and make your land desolate so no one can live in it."

⁹This is what the LORD Almighty says:

"Let them glean the remnant of Israel as thoroughly as a vine; pass your hand over the branches again, like one gathering grapes."

10 To whom can I speak and give warning?
Who will listen to me?
Their ears are closed
so they cannot hear.
The word of the LORD is offensive to
them;
they find no pleasure in it.
11 But I am full of the wrath of the LORD,
and I cannot hold it in.

"Pour it out on the children in the street and on the young men gathered together; both husband and wife will be caught in it, and the old, those weighed down with years.

12Their houses will be turned over to others, together with their fields and their wives,

when I stretch out my hand against those who live in the land," declares the LORD.

13"From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike, all practice deceit.

¹⁴They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious.

'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace.

¹⁵Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct?

No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush.

So they will fall among the fallen; they will be brought down when I punish them,"

says the LORD.

¹⁶This is what the LORD says:

"Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. But you said, 'We will not walk in it.'

17 I appointed watchmen over you and said, 'Listen to the sound of the trumpet!' But you said, 'We will not listen.'

18 Therefore hear, O nations; observe, O witnesses,

what will happen to them.

¹⁹Hear, O earth:

I am bringing disaster on this people, the fruit of their schemes, because they have not listened to my words and have rejected my law.

What do I care about incense from Sheba or sweet calamus from a distant land?
Your burnt offerings are not acceptable; your sacrifices do not please me."

²¹Therefore this is what the LORD says:

"I will put obstacles before this people. Fathers and sons alike will stumble over them; neighbors and friends will perish."

²²This is what the LORD says:

"Look, an army is coming from the land of the north; a great nation is being stirred up from the ends of the earth.

23 They are armed with bow and spear; they are cruel and show no mercy. They sound like the roaring sea as they ride on their horses; they come like men in battle formation to attack you, O Daughter of Zion."

We have heard reports about them, and our hands hang limp.
Anguish has gripped us, pain like that of a woman in labor.
Do not go out to the fields or walk on the roads,
for the enemy has a sword,

and there is terror on every side. ²⁶O my people, put on sackcloth and roll in ashes; mourn with bitter wailing as for an only son, for suddenly the destroyer will come upon us. ²⁷"I have made you a tester of metals and my people the ore, that you may observe and test their ways. ²⁸They are all hardened rebels, going about to slander. They are bronze and iron; they all act corruptly. ²⁹The bellows blow fiercely to burn away the lead with fire, but the refining goes on in vain; the wicked are not purged out. ³⁰They are called rejected silver, because the LORD has rejected them."

Original Meaning

THIS SECTION OF Jeremiah is essentially a collection of prophecies concerning judgments to befall Judah. It is interspersed, however, with quotations attributed to Jeremiah, God, Jerusalem, and the people, all of which give this section a dialogical character (e.g., 4:10; 5:1–6).

As with the previous section, the individual prophecies in this collection likely date from various times in Jeremiah's public ministry. The primary theme is judgment on Judah and Jerusalem through the historical process as God sends disasters and enemies against his people. A few "catchword topics" provide links between some of the oracles and assist with the thematic coherence of the collection. Among these topics are descriptions of a foe (often "from the north") who will wreak havoc on Judah, the

senselessness of the people, the corruption of the "heart" (*leb*), and a call for the people to lament insofar as God is judging them.

As to its dialogical character, there is little indication how this conversational material was presented to the prophet's contemporaries in Judah (or even if all of it was made public orally). For readers, however, these interchanges are intended to be instructive, setting forth a depiction of the prophetic office as the location of pain and prayer, not just the source of accusation and judgment. The prophet laments over the pain he observes and over the inability of his hearers to comprehend the true nature of their predicament.

4:3–4. It is difficult to know whether these two verses conclude the Lord's reply concerning repentance in 4:1–2 or if they originated independently of 4:1–2. The Hebrew particle *ki* ("for") with which verse 3 begins can be a linking particle—meaning "therefore" or something similar—or it can be an emphasizing particle introducing something new. In either case, the basic point of these two verses can be appreciated: Repentance toward God is symbolized by a circumcision of the heart.

Genesis 17 provides an etiology for the role of circumcision in the religious life of ancient Israel. In that account the removal of the foreskin from the male genitalia is a sign (17:11; 'ot) of the covenant, a mark in the flesh that represents the bond established by God with Abraham and his descendants. Males so marked bore a permanent sign in their flesh of their acceptance of and membership in God's covenant. Circumcision of the heart, the organ of understanding and will, is obviously a metaphor for preparing a "wholehearted" commitment to the Lord and proper obedience to the revelation of his will. This metaphor in Jeremiah presupposes that the fleshly mark is inadequate apart from personal commitment.

There are similar references elsewhere in Jeremiah and in Deuteronomy to the significance of both the terms *circumcision* and *heart*. In Jeremiah 17:1–10 the sin of Judah is described as engraved on the tablets of their hearts. One way in which God assesses character and commitment is through examining the heart; according to 17:9–10, the heart of the people is desperately sick. In 24:7 God promises to give a new heart to his people (this assumes the fatal fallibility of the "old" one!). Similarly, Deuteronomy 10:16 preserves the imperative to Israel to circumcise their hearts, much like the command here in Jeremiah 4:4, and Deuteronomy 30:1–10

preserves the prophecy that after the coming judgment, the Lord will circumcise the hearts of his people so that they will love him with all their heart and soul.

These various references presuppose that Israel must make a radical commitment to God but also that God's people will be unable to fulfill that commitment unless he acts decisively to renew and transform them. In the previous chapter (Jer. 3:22), Jeremiah has already indicated that healing and restoration come only from the Lord. The call in 4:3–4 takes seriously the role of the people and their affections, but it does not assume that a mere act of the will on their part will make everything restored. Elsewhere Jeremiah puts this dynamic in the context of the new covenant that God will make with Israel and Judah, a transforming act that will include writing his Torah on their hearts (31:31–34).²

4:5–13. Judah and Jerusalem are called to assemble, to put on sackcloth, and to lament the approach of a foe from the north. The approach of this enemy is in reality the approach of the Lord, who comes against the people like a lion or whose blast of anger is like a searing wind. God is a warrior (Ex. 15:3), but in this context the divine warrior comes against his own people.

Verse 10 is an autobiographical comment that accuses God of deceiving the people by giving a word of "peace" (*šalom*) when in actuality a mortal threat is at hand. Just what this means is not clear, although it is a frank indication that Jeremiah and God engage each other pointedly! Perhaps the prophet's charge assumes the words of the prophets and priests mentioned in the previous verse, who may have assured the people in the name of the Lord that deliverance will come (cf. 6:13–14; 8:11–12). Elsewhere, Jeremiah shows respect to a prophet who proclaims a word of deliverance, even if he repudiates that message after further reflection and prayer (Jer. 28). A related possibility is that Jeremiah's own words about judgment to come have been proclaimed for several years, but, as yet, no catastrophic blow has fallen. Those prophets and priests who have proclaimed peace have been right (so far), and in both frustration and alarm, Jeremiah wonders how God can allow these circumstances to exist.

4:14–22. These verses continue the sentiments of 4:5–13. The prophet beseeches Jerusalem to cleanse her heart and remove her wicked thoughts. Note the reference to the heart—one of the "catchwords" in this collection

of oracles. Those who would besiege her are approaching. God reminds Jerusalem of the dire consequences of her activity. Her own "conduct and actions" (v. 18) have brought these appalling circumstances to light.

In his own *heart* (note again the catchword) Jeremiah expresses horror at the realization of Jerusalem's impending doom (4:19–22). In striking fashion his emotional reaction to this doom is translated into physical reaction, with "writhing in pain." One wonders if the prophet somehow publicly acts out this physical reaction or if a recognition of such horror is left to the inference of hearer and reader. If he does, it will add illustration and poignancy to his role. Even as "the voice" reflects the pain of judgment, the prophet lays the responsibility for failure with the people, who are described as "fools" and "senseless children."

A close reading of this section brings together the voices of Jeremiah, God, and the people in an amazing way. It begins with Jeremiah addressing Jerusalem in almost frantic fashion. The emotion fits that of the prophet, but the refrain of 4:17 ("declares the LORD") indicates that this concern for the city is also that of God. The writhing pain of 4:19–20 may be that of Jerusalem as she watches her land and inhabitants being consumed, or perhaps it is that of the prophet, who has begun to grasp the enormity of the tragedy to come. The third party to this emotion-laden conversation is God himself. The sad comment in 4:22 that the people "do not know *me*" can be no other than the voice of God himself, as represented through the prophet. The conversation and mixing of voices are such that they blend together. In the final analysis, no one—people, prophet, or God—remains aloof from the horror of it all.

4:23–26. In the visionary perspective of the prophet, the Judean landscape is transformed into something "formless and empty," as if judgment on Judah will undo the very goodness and order of creation. "Formless and empty" are the same two terms used in Genesis 1:2 to describe the chaos of creation before the creative Spirit of God began its work and God spoke order into existence. Judah's sinfulness takes on a type of cosmic context in this visionary account, as if the people's folly makes them complicit in a consuming cosmic chaos. Four times comes the refrain "I looked," followed each time by a vision of the unraveling of creation. The passage functions as a horrible visionary interlude, as the prophet

pauses from his projection of the foe coming on Jerusalem and casts his Spirit-aided eye toward a looming chaos.

- **4:27–31.** The prophet returns to the horror that will befall Jerusalem. God will speak and judgment will come, just as surely as in the creation account God spoke and order was brought out of chaos. Verse 28 states that the earth will "mourn" ('abal) or languish. This sad comment reflects a synthetic understanding of existence, whereby the personified land is affected by the folly of the people's sinfulness.³ The folly and failure of the people affect more than their historical circumstances; it extends to their whole cultural and environmental setting.
- In 4:31 the prophet depicts Jerusalem's cries like those of birth pains. It is not, however, the joy of giving birth but the fear of death that is on her lips. She is in collapse before murderers! Again, did Jeremiah publicly present this message? Such emotion is not presented well through smooth modulation but through identification with the pain that arouses it.
- **5:1–9.** This section contains an interchange between God and the audience in Jerusalem, mediated by the prophet, who offers commentary in verses 3–6. The passage begins with a challenge for people to search Jerusalem for anyone who "deals honestly and seeks the truth." One can also translate "deals honestly" as "does justice" (*mišpaṭ*). Apparently no one fits these requirements. Although judgment has already struck Jerusalem (death of Josiah? drought? first Babylonian onslaught?), there has been no repentance.
- In 5:3–6 Jeremiah himself attempts a search of people, both the poor and great, but "their rebellion is great." God's reply is that forgiveness is not presently an option (cf. 5:9 with 5:29).
- 5:10–17. Jerusalem is now personified as the possessor of vines and branches, which symbolize people (cf. Isa. 5:1–7, where the vines of a vineyard represent the people). Not only have both Israel and Judah refused to accept that their misfortune is the Lord's judgment on them; there is even a sense among some that the Lord is not active and will not judge in the future either. Jeremiah 4:12 places a quotation in their mouth to the effect that neither sword nor famine will strike them. Apparently these sentiments are provoked by "prophets" (v. 13), since Jeremiah replies that these prophets "are but wind." Underlying a text like this is heated debate among prophets, all of whom claim to represent the will of God.

The Lord makes Jeremiah's prophetic word of judgment like a fire consuming wood (v. 14). More specifically, the Lord declares that a foreign nation is coming to devastate the people (vv. 15–17). This depiction is one of the "catchword topics" used repeatedly in chapters 4–6. One result of their onslaught is that the people will be carried away and serve foreigners in a strange land (i.e., the Exile).

- **5:18–19.** In this short prose section the Lord offers commentary on the previous verse and its reference to exile. Two sentiments are expressed succinctly. (1) Exile from the Promised Land does not bring an end to the existence of the people. In context, that is "good news." (2) The Lord also reinforces the Exile as a just reward for the polytheistic deviations of the people in forsaking him. In the Exile they will serve foreigners.
- **5:20–31.** Jeremiah describes the people as "senseless" and employs the rhetorical device of describing them as possessing eyes that do not see and ears that do not hear. According to Isaiah 6:9–10, prophetic preaching of judgment actually confirms that the people are dull of sight and sound, appearing heedless of their predicament. Jeremiah's invective continues by noting that they refuse to "fear" the Lord; that is, they do not hold the Lord in awe and serve him with reverence, as is befitting a holy and righteous God, who has always blessed them with regular crops and rain. Jeremiah 5:25 then underscores the correspondence between act and consequence: "Your sins have deprived you of good." The Lord indicts both priest and prophet for misleading God's people in the concluding verses of the chapter (cf. 2:8; 6:13–14; 8:11).

A general breakdown of common decency, not to mention the covenant responsibilities of an elect nation, is described in 5:26–28. Greed and violence go hand in hand. Here Jeremiah joins his work with that of other prophets who call for social rectitude among the people.

6:1–9. Chapter 6 functions like a summary of chapters 4–5. It contains calls to flee from the enemy (6:1) and to mourn the fall of the city (6:26). One cannot tell from the poetry if the depiction of the siege and fall is proleptic, projecting what will come in the near future, or if these words are offered during one of the times when the city of Jerusalem is surrounded by the Babylonians. Because the text contains no reference to dates, the effect of the call to flee and mourn is to remind the readers that Jeremiah announced in advance what befell the nation.

Disaster is imminent for Judah and Jerusalem. The city is "the Daughter of Zion" (6:2), so beautiful and yet so tragic. Verse 6 depicts a siege along with a succinct statement of the reason: "This city must be punished; it is filled with oppression." In 6:9 the prophet returns to a theme articulated in 5:10: The enemy will glean the vineyard of the Lord, making sure that even a surviving remnant feels the brunt of judgment.

- **6:10–15.** Announcements about the coming judgment have fallen on deaf ears. Jeremiah, speaking for himself and for God, wonders to whom else can he speak? He confesses that he is wearied at holding in God's wrath, and he hears the command to pour it out on the city that has known no shame. As in previous oracles, the priests and prophets come under special censure for their failures. They have led the people astray with their proclamations of "peace ... when there is no peace" (v. 14; cf. 8:11). In a memorable comment the people are judged as so corrupt and shameless that they do not know how to blush (6:15)!
- 6:16–26. Through his prophet, the Lord asks the people to (re-)consider the "good way," the "ancient paths," that lead to security. The prophet, as vocal mediator, represents God and the people in conversation, while the people rudely contravene or reject divine guidance. They are reminded that God raised up "watchmen" (earlier prophets? godly reformers?), who warned the people—but to no avail. The people continue to reject God's "law" (Torah, instruction, v. 19). The fate to befall them is actually the "fruit of their [own] schemes." Correspondingly, God rejects the sacrifices of the people as inadequate in light of their moral and spiritual disobedience. As part of their judgment God will put "obstacles" in their way. This may be another way to refer to the foe that is coming from the north to attack the land. Jeremiah utters a severe warning about this foe.
- **6:27–30.** Jeremiah's prophetic role is that of a "tester of metals." The refining process of calling for repentance and announcing judgment has not separated the wicked from the righteous but simply confirmed that the people as a whole are corrupt. These verses provide something of a commentary or definition of the prophetic office. Prophets are raised up by God as refiners.

THREE CONTEXTS FOR prophetic judgment. The Bible offers us three broad contexts in which to set these judgmental prophecies. (1) In the context of Jeremiah 1, these prophecies in chapters 4–6 further articulate how God's words will "uproot and tear down ... destroy and overthrow" (1:10). Judah and Jerusalem face a judgment sent by God that takes shape in space and time. A foe from the north (eventually Babylon) will devastate the land, besiege the city of Jerusalem, and destroy it. Not only do these prophecies contain a startling combination of visionary depictions of judgment with detail and specificity, but one will find many additional prophecies of judgment in Jeremiah that elaborate on these same themes.

(2) We can also set these prophecies in the context of the fellowship of prophets in the Old Testament. For all the attention to detail and historical setting, Jeremiah is at one with fellow prophets such as Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Ezekiel. Judgment begins with the "family of God" (cf. 1 Peter 4:17). The common prophetic claim is that no generation is guaranteed security when it stands in flagrant violation of its God-given identity. The prophetic call for covenant loyalty and filial obedience to the Lord has a flip side to it of judgment on a faithless people.

With respect to a prophetic posture or profile, it is important to call attention to the dialogical way in which these prophecies are presented. They contain rhetorical questions, quotations, and indications of such physical reactions that hearers are invited to respond. On more than one occasion it is difficult to separate the reaction of the prophet from that of God, so closely are the two of them tied by textual reference. This does not stop the prophet, however, from adding his own questions to God!

(3) A final context comes in the manifold witness of the New Testament that the way is broad that leads to destruction and many find their way to it (Matt. 7:13). Jeremiah's painful prophecies are not at variance with the New Testament proclamation of the gospel; they are part of the very foundation of the gospel that begins with the conviction that the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). No foundation for renewal can be built until it is recognized that corruption infects all human institutions and vitiates all human intentions for self-preservation.

Corporate thinking. These prophecies of judgment insist that hearers think corporately about human affairs. This is more difficult for modern Western people than for others. Many in the West have oriented themselves

toward the autonomy of the individual in such a way that attempts to define institutions and cultures as a whole become problematic. People increasingly find themselves unable to think in these categories, and without some patient probing on the part of pastors and teachers, they will revert to a more comfortable individualism. To paraphrase Jeremiah, corporate responsibility is a theme that falls on deaf ears.

For Jeremiah, however, it is "Judah and Jerusalem," "Daughter of Zion," God's "people," the "house of Israel" who are under scrutiny and subject to judgment for their sins. Should there be a righteous person in Jerusalem, God will pardon the city (5:1), but the clear implication is that no one is righteous, no, not one (Ps. 14:1; Rom. 3:10). Perhaps there are overtones of the Sodom and Gomorrah account in Genesis 18 and the dialogue between Abraham and God. The story of the cynic philosopher Diogenes is also a parallel; he searched Athens for one honest man, only to be frustrated. Jeremiah's role as tester of metals (6:27–30) produced the same results: the corporate guilt of the people.

Modern Christians may be helped to see the relevance of these prophecies by considering them in the context of institutional life. To individuals who protest that they personally are "right with the Lord," we must stress that God also deals with the character of congregations and church bodies as a whole, just as God assesses cultures and nations. Individuals are participants in institutional life and part of its manifold character. Many individuals will tell you how they are influenced by or even victimized by institutional powers.

One of the keys to appropriating the prophetic critique of Jeremiah is to show Christians how we are all complicit in the work of larger institutions, even when we feel aloof from them. No one finally is an island (John Donne) and unconnected with institutional life. To argue the opposite—that a person was truly unconnected to institutional life—will incur the judgment that such an isolated individual ignores the demands to love one's neighbor as one's self.

"Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows" (Gal. 6:7). This apostolic claim corresponds on a corporate level with these prophecies of Jeremiah. What God's people have sown they will reap (Jer. 4:18; 5:25; 6:19). It is worth a moment's reflection that the apostolic claim for a relationship between moral act and consequence comes in a

letter (Galatians) most passionate about justification by grace through faith. God will not be mocked by the misunderstandings of cheap grace and divine indifference.

Jeremiah's words reflect this misunderstanding of God's character on the part of some contemporaries (Jer. 5:12). The prophet does not, however, represent a legalistic understanding of covenant faith, since God is the initiator of the covenant with his people, and God will bring healing where none can be produced by Israel. There is a hint of God's freedom in the aside comment of 4:27 that God will not destroy the land completely. What Jeremiah does represent is a prophetic claim that God will use the historical process to bring on the people the consequences of their own infidelity to his rule.

Contemporary Significance

JUDGMENT TODAY. A fundamental question of theology faces any interpreter of judgmental passages like these in Jeremiah. It is not enough to affirm that Jeremiah's words fit in the larger biblical context of God's righteous judgments in history. This affirmation is what the book of Jeremiah demanded from its first readers, who looked at Judah's fall and asked "Why?" The question really is not even whether one is prepared to affirm that God will judge the failures of the current generation of his people—though this is a significant question. It is really the question of whether the interpreter can affirm that even now the decline of the moral and spiritual life in segments of the church (and the corresponding moral decline and indifference in much of the Western world) is part of God's corporate judgment, and whether one should point to further judgments to come as a consequence of this decline.

Perhaps an interpreter will hesitate to affirm the second part of this issue and want to concentrate on a theological analysis of current ecclesiastical failures. A legitimate interpretation of Jeremiah's words for the contemporary church is not required to announce judgment on the audience (as Jeremiah did to his contemporaries), but his words should drive the interpreter to note the failings of Judah and Jerusalem and then to ask if corresponding failures inhibit the life of God's people today. Even if contemporary sins differ somewhat in kind from those enunciated by

Jeremiah, his words should also drive the reader to repent for failures and to seek moral and spiritual renewal. What follows is a (nonexhaustive) list of interpretive proposals based on this section in Jeremiah.

In 4:23–26 Jeremiah visualizes the earth in chaos and disorder. As noted above, the imagery reflects Genesis 1:2 and the chaotic conditions of the cosmos before God spoke order into existence. "I looked, and there were no people" (Jer. 4:25), exclaims the prophet. Creation is the theater of God's glory, and people made in God's image are the crowned stewards of the land (Gen. 1:26–31; Ps. 8). Moral and spiritual failure in Judah prompt prophetic eyes to see the land and people as turned back to chaos and disorder. One wonders if this vision is something like moral entropy, where the disintegration of communal life is the inevitable outworking of moral and spiritual failure.

In the modern West (the part of God's creation that I know best), there is great concern in some quarters about the decline in order and civility. Among many Western churches there is correspondingly concern over the diminished morality of members and declining spiritual vitality. Are these factors related, and is a visionary depiction of coming chaos an accurate assessment of trends? Jeremiah's vision of chaos emerges spiritually from his deep involvement with a people who are heedless of divine standards and skeptical that God will actually judge them. Does this not sound familiar to Western ears? Is it not the case that Western society has essentially capitulated to the demands of secular pluralism that moral and values-based judgments be restricted to the private realm, where they will not intrude on public policy decisions? And does the rising perception that society is spinning out of moral control because of its spiritual bankruptcy not point to a future chaos?

Heart. Jeremiah indicts his audience as fools who lack perception and who are stubborn and rebelliously corrupt in heart (Jer. 4:22; 5:21–23; cf. 17:9–11; 18:12). By "heart" Jeremiah means the source of understanding and volition that makes a person a responsible agent to love God and one's neighbor. Fools in this sense are those who fail to grasp moral meaning and significance; it is not a question of a lack of native intelligence but of culpable failure to perceive the truth and to act accordingly. The fools whom Jeremiah depicts are those whose hearts have rebelled against the

truth and who can be held morally and spiritually responsible for their failures.

Jesus speaks similarly of folly and hardness of heart when he refers to those whose thoughts and actions contradict what they know is right (Matt. 5:27–28; Mark 7:14–23). When he tells his disciples that "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:21), Jesus affirms that the heart is the seat of the human will and that human allegiance is a moral and spiritual commitment, not a neutral lifestyle choice.

One might paraphrase Jeremiah's language about the corruption of the people's heart by saying that rebellion against the truth of God is essentially moral, not intellectual. "Although [people] claimed to be wise, they became fools" (Rom. 1:22), because they have willfully evaded God's prior claim to their allegiance. God's judgments are righteous because they take into account the moral agency of people. Jeremiah would insist that this is never more true than with God's people. An interpreter of Jeremiah's judgmental words for today would do well to emphasize that God's standards for judging are not derived from lists of forbidden activities; they result more fundamentally from his taking seriously the moral agency of people and the privileged responsibility accorded them in the high calling of their creation.

Prophetic activity. Jeremiah's words of judgment stand as a critique of immoral society and the complicity of the church as societal members. The church can hear these words of judgment as reasons why it must always insist that society's problems are at root moral failures (not technological or administrative problems), and the church can hear through Jeremiah's preaching that it must always examine its character in light of God's Word. Moreover, the church can hear his words through the gift of the gospel as it seeks to follow her Lord through the gift of regenerated hearts (Eph. 3:17). What Christians know in their hearts to be the truth, they should joyfully seek to do, not as justifying activity but as spiritual obedience grounded in gratitude.

Jeremiah's words raise the question of prophetic activity on the part of the church and by individual Christians who seek to follow the Lord. (1) Prophetic activity is in obedience to the revealed word of God. Jeremiah's "call" in chapter 1 sets the power of God's spoken message at the center of the prophet's work. In 5:14 Jeremiah's words of judgment are like fire that consumes wood. Prophetic activity brings the word of the Lord to bear on

circumstances and reveals God's assessment of them. A contemporary application of Jeremiah's words means first of all that Christians have assessed a situation in light of God's standards of judgment. This is not an easy task; prophetic activity is easily misunderstood, and it may expect to get a prophet's reward (Matt. 5:11–12). So it was for Jeremiah, as other texts will make clear. The depiction of Jeremiah as a "tester of metals" (Jer. 6:27–30) underscores prophetic activity as the refining of character and motives, as a means of exposing God's truth among differing options, and as a way to weigh and assess the value of human commitments.

- (2) Jeremiah's dialogue with the Lord (4:10; 5:4) implies that a prophetic response to sin is active. The prophet seeks the Lord's leading so that sinfulness is not just named for what it is and judgment is not simply announced for what it is, but a prophet searches for ways to end the evil activity and its evil consequences.
- (3) Prophetic activity is prayerful engagement with God about the nature and purpose of judgment. So it was with Jeremiah, and so it must be for the church. One may denounce evil and march for justice and the amelioration of societal ills; but unless one also prays that God's temporal judgments become a means to discipline and to transform evildoers, denunciation and marching are not prophetic activities according to Jeremiah's example.

Jeremiah 7:1–8:3

THIS IS THE word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²"Stand at the gate of the LORD's house and there proclaim this message:

"Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD. ³This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. ⁴Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!" ⁵If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly. ⁶if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, ⁷then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever. ⁸But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless.

9""Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, ¹⁰ and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, "We are safe"—safe to do all these detestable things? ¹¹Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD.

12"Go now to the place in Shiloh where I first made a dwelling for my Name, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel.

13While you were doing all these things, declares the LORD, I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer.

¹⁴Therefore, what I did to Shiloh I will now do to the house that bears my Name, the temple you trust in, the place I gave to you and your fathers. ¹⁵I will thrust you from my presence, just as I did all your brothers, the people of Ephraim.'

16"So do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them; do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you. ¹⁷Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? ¹⁸The children gather wood, the fathers light the fire, and the women knead the dough and make cakes of bread for the Queen of Heaven. They pour out drink offerings to other gods to provoke me to anger. ¹⁹But am I the one they are provoking? declares the LORD. Are they not rather harming themselves, to their own shame?

²⁰"Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: My anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place, on man and beast, on the trees of the field and on the fruit of the ground, and it will burn and not be quenched.

²¹"This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Go ahead, add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat yourselves!

²²For when I brought your forefathers out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices,

²³but I gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in all the ways I command you, that it may go well with you. ²⁴But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts. They went backward and not forward. ²⁵From the time your forefathers left Egypt until now, day after day, again and again I sent you my servants the prophets. ²⁶But they did not listen to

me or pay attention. They were stiff-necked and did more evil than their forefathers.'

²⁷"When you tell them all this, they will not listen to you; when you call to them, they will not answer. ²⁸Therefore say to them, 'This is the nation that has not obeyed the LORD its God or responded to correction. Truth has perished; it has vanished from their lips. ²⁹Cut off your hair and throw it away; take up a lament on the barren heights, for the LORD has rejected and abandoned this generation that is under his wrath.

30""The people of Judah have done evil in my eyes, declares the LORD. They have set up their detestable idols in the house that bears my Name and have defiled it. ³¹They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire—something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind. ³²So beware, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when people will no longer call it Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter, for they will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room. ³³Then the carcasses of this people will become food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and there will be no one to frighten them away. ³⁴I will bring an end to the sounds of joy and gladness and to the voices of bride and bridegroom in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem, for the land will become desolate.

8:1" At that time, declares the LORD, the bones of the kings and officials of Judah, the bones of the priests and prophets, and the bones of the people of Jerusalem will be removed from their graves. ²They will be exposed to the sun and the moon and all the stars of the heavens, which they have loved and

served and which they have followed and consulted and worshiped. They will not be gathered up or buried, but will be like refuse lying on the ground. ³Wherever I banish them, all the survivors of this evil nation will prefer death to life, declares the LORD Almighty.'

Original Meaning

CHAPTER 7 CONVEYS Jeremiah's (in-)famous temple "sermon." It is prose rather than poetry; thus, chapter 7 begins a new section different from the predominantly poetic contents in chapters 2–6. Whether the sermon originally included all the material now in 7:1–8:3 or whether some additional prophecies of Jeremiah have been appended in the process of transmission and compilation, readers will recognize why Jeremiah was later restricted from preaching in the temple precincts (36:5). These words cut to the quick.

Chapter 26 preserves a similar but shorter address given at the temple. Many interpreters, therefore, have concluded that chapter 7 contains the longer form of the sermon while chapter 26 contains a summary of it, along with a description of audience reaction. This reconstruction is plausible but not certain. Jeremiah may well have delivered the gist of this somber message on more than one occasion. The temple address in chapter 26 is dated to the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign (26:1; 609/608 B.C.). If chapters 7 and 26 describe the same event, then we have one of the few indications of a specific date for material in the first half of the book of Jeremiah. The material in chapter 7 fits well with the reign of Jehoiakim.

Not only was the death of Josiah a traumatic event for the state of Judah, but the transitions that followed it were difficult as well. Jehoiakim became the third monarch on the throne in less than a year. Josiah had been followed by his son Jehoahaz, but he was removed soon afterward by the Egyptians, who favored Jehoiakim, another son of Josiah. Apparently Jehoiakim was more compliant with their wishes. Jeremiah has nothing good to say about Jehoiakim and the life of the people under his regime.

The pronouncements in the sermon contain a call to repentance from evil deeds, a searing reminder of the Decalogue as the standards of communal

service to God, a denial that God will defend the temple from onslaught, and a polemic attack on various polytheistic activities, including ritual practices related to human sacrifice in a valley near Jerusalem's temple mount. These prose pronouncements are similar in form to Moses' sermons of Deuteronomy; indeed, the temple sermon and Deuteronomy share an emphasis on the sanctity of the place where God's Name dwells (cf. below). One should not find this surprising. Within Jeremiah's own lifetime a book (lit., a scroll) of covenant law was discovered in the temple that became the catalyst for King Josiah's reform measures (2 Kings 22–23; 2 Chron. 34–35). Many interpreters conclude that the book discovered was Deuteronomy in either penultimate or final form.

7:1–15. Jeremiah warns worshipers not to trust in deceptive words that give them false hopes concerning the security of the temple or the efficacy of their religious activities. Three times the phrase "[this is] the temple of the LORD" is repeated in verse 4. It seems to function like a mantra, as if simply repeating it or even asserting it makes it true. Just because the temple sits in Jerusalem, worshipers should not assume that they can fail in their covenantal responsibilities to God and neighbor and then come to the temple and cry, "We are safe!"

Jeremiah has no intention of denying that the majestic temple on Mount Zion belongs to the Lord. Speaking for God, however, he asserts that the Lord is not bound to preserve the temple at all costs in the face of the people's flagrant disobedience. The prophet points to the shrine at Shiloh during the time of Samuel and Eli (1 Sam. 1–4) to say that God may send judgment even on a place of worship that bears his Name.²

In Deuteronomy 12:5, 11, God promised to choose a place from among the Israelite tribes "to put his Name ... for his dwelling." The site would be designated for animal sacrifice and certain other ritual acts of worship. It would be a place for pilgrimage—the only appropriate site for these endeavors, in contrast to the Canaanite inhabitants, who had many "high places" for sacrificial worship. Deuteronomy does not give the name of the place God would choose; that Jerusalem became the location, however, is clear from the dedicatory prayer of Solomon in 1 Kings 8:23–53. His prayer acknowledges that this house is for God's Name (8:29, 44; cf. 8:20), yet that no temple encapsulates God, for not even the highest heavens can do that (8:27).

There was nothing magical about the temple in Jerusalem with respect to divine presence. The claim that God's Name dwelt there was a metaphorical way of saying that God could be personally encountered at that site. It was a place of his choosing. At the same time, God recognizes that he is not tied to the structure or somehow bound irrevocably to its fate.

The prophet refers to the basic covenant stipulations in Jer. 7:9 as they are known in the Decalogue (Deut. 4:13). Moreover in Jeremiah 7:6 the prophet charges that Judah has oppressed the alien, the widow, and the orphan. Specifically cited in verse 9 are stealing, murder, adultery, and false witness. Each of these comes from the so-called second table of the law, where communal relations are regulated. Burning incense to Baal and following other gods, however, reflects the first commandment and its charge to "have no other gods before me." Taken as a whole, the prophet charges that those attending temple service love neither God nor neighbor according to the standards of the Torah. Instead, they grasp at the magical properties of the temple in hopes that God will protect the city against the enemy.

7:16–34. Jeremiah reveals that God has commanded him not to intercede for the people (cf. 15:1–9). Why should Jeremiah intercede for the people when some of them have turned to the worship of the Queen of Heaven (cf. ch. 44)³ and other deities? Their trust is misplaced. Jeremiah is but one in a line of prophets whom God sent to his people, each of whom was rejected. The hardhearted people have refused to heed their warnings and announcements of judgment. Sacrifices are not acceptable when flagrant breaches of covenantal ethics are rampant.⁴ They are no more efficacious for a sinful, obdurate people than the temple will be in the day of assault by the enemy.

In a nearby valley nicknamed "Slaughter," the Judeans participated in the horrifying rites of child sacrifice (cf. 19:1–15). Which valley near Jerusalem is an interesting question; probably it is the valley along the western and southern boundaries of the current "old city" known as the Wadi er Rababi. *Topheth* is a term of uncertain derivation, but it refers to a place where human sacrificial and cremation rituals took place. Some Judeans must have believed that they appeared the Lord by partaking in these rituals, since God protests through the prophet that he has not commanded such activities. Elsewhere these activities are associated with

Baal and Molech (2 Kings 23:10; Jer. 19:5). Jerusalem itself will become a place of slaughter (like the nearby Topheth) because of her rejection of the Lord.

8:1–3. These words may have been appended to the sermon because they reflect the horror of manipulating and exposing human corpses. The Topheth rites in 7:30–34 apparently included sacrificial rites with corpses (of children). Without repentance, death will be the only future for Judah.

Bridging Contexts

BEHAVIORAL MATTERS. Although there is no one-to-one correspondence between ancient Israel and the church and the duties of each under the old and new covenants respectively, their common identity as God's people means that the church should hear a word to Israel as instructive for its own life. Nevertheless, since there is no one-to-one correspondence, Christian interpreters are not forced to find exact parallels in behaviors to make Jeremiah 7 relevant. The question of corporate faithfulness in the life of faith can be (and should be!) asked from generation to generation.

To put the matter of interpretation in a broader biblical context, Jeremiah's words about the need for Judah to change its behavior or lose its place in the land of promise are part of a much broader scriptural message about relating rightly to God. The "if-then" language of 7:3–7 is like that of the introductory address of God through Moses to the people at Sinai (Ex. 19:4–6): "If you ... keep my covenant ... then ... you will be for me a kingdom of priests." It is similar to the mandates of Jesus to "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is here" (Matt. 4:17), or "seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (6:33).

Behavior matters are a powerful indicator that reveals the allegiances of the heart. The particulars of Jeremiah (lack of justice, polytheism, violation of the Decalogue) are not new instructions for Judah but central to the covenant relationship God has granted to them. Jesus readily acknowledges that the Ten Commandments indicate the proper way to life because they bring a person into relationship with God, who alone is the Author and Giver of life (Matt. 19:16–30; Mark 10:17–31; Luke 18:18–30).

False hopes about the temple. Jeremiah's words about the false hopes associated with the temple (Jer. 7:4, 10) are also part of a much broader scriptural message about ways in which God reveals himself to his people and the corresponding ways in which worshipers should honor that self-revelation of God through worship and obedience. Through the tabernacle God mediated his presence with the Israelites during their desert wandering. The Lord who redeemed them also instructed them not to take the tabernacle for granted or violate its sanctity.

Solomon's dedicatory prayer at the founding of the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 8; 2 Chron. 6) acknowledged the blessing that God's Name was present through the temple (1 Kings 8:16–20, 29). The Lord of creation and history was personally present among his people to instruct them and to receive their praise. This holy and gracious presence of God's Name did not mean that God was limited to the sphere of the temple or bound to its spatial limitations; on the contrary, even heaven, God's "dwelling place" (1 Kings 8:27–30), cannot truly contain him. God "lives in unapproachable light" (1 Tim. 6:16) and cannot be seen or approached except when he accommodates himself to the limitations of human capacities of perception.

Jesus' disciples spoke with wonder about the temple complex built by Herod the Great on the spot first purchased by David (Mark 13:1). Behind the continuity of centuries of worship on that sacred spot lay also the facts of temple destruction by the Babylonians and temple defilement by the forces of Antiochus Epiphanes (1 Macc. 1:11–61; cf. Dan. 11:14–35). Jesus' reply that the great complex would be destroyed does not reflect hostility to the temple or denial of its divine role, but recognizes that the physical complex itself is dispensable. History would bring an end to the temple complex but not to the significance it represented.

Jesus himself overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple courtyards, proclaiming that his Father's house would not be a "den of robbers" (Luke 19:45–46). That reference is to Jeremiah 7:11; it shows how Jesus had absorbed the thrust of Jeremiah's temple sermon as an indictment of the people, whose actions violated the sanctity of the temple. Judgment on the temple was judgment on those for whom the temple's purpose was perverted.

Jeremiah's address presupposes the significance of the temple as a divine dwelling. He speaks words of judgment against those who view the temple in magical terms as God's guarantee of their temporal security. John's Gospel represents Jesus as God's Word living among us (John 1:14) in language similar to the tabernacle (or temple) as God's presence among Israel of old. Indeed, the temple—like all the Old Testament—bears witness to God's approach in Jesus Christ (see John 2:14–22).

Other apostolic witnesses in the New Testament take up John's recognition of Jesus as God's temple. Both Paul and Peter proclaim the church as the body of Christ and the spiritual temple (Rom. 12:4–5; 1 Cor. 12:12, 27; Eph. 1:22–23; 2:19–22; 1 Peter 2:1–5). Individual Christians too are a temple of God's dwelling (1 Cor. 6:19–20). Thus, the imperative to Christians to "honor God with your body" (6:20) reflects a concern similar to that of Jeremiah under the old covenant: Behavior matters, for through it God is either glorified or mocked.

Worship and sacrifice. Jeremiah's temple address is also the occasion for words about worship and sacrifice. His criticism of polytheism has parallels in both Old and New Testaments. Polytheism is a religious response that fails to take seriously God's claim for exclusive worship. The Decalogue is headed by the claim that God has redeemed a people from slavery, and its first command is the prohibition of having other gods.

The particulars of Jeremiah's own critique (Queen of Heaven, other gods) show people who by their religious activities are trying to secure their fortunes in uncertain times. For them religion is the system by which they induce the gods to provide what they want. The criticism about sacrifices in Jer. 7:21–26 follows this line of critique as well. Sacrifices are not means in order to force God into a religion of compliance to the wish lists of worshipers, nor are they a substitute for a life of grateful obedience (cf. Isa. 1:10–17; Amos 5:21–26).

The child sacrifices at the Topheth are a particular case of misunderstanding the significance of sacrificial ritual. The ancient world considered the offering of a child to a deity as a supremely religious act, since it gave to the deity, the author of life, what was most precious to the worshiper (cf. Mic. 6:6–8). But God did not require such a sacrifice of Abraham (Gen. 22) or of the Exodus generation (Ex. 13:2, 11–15). In those cases God provided an effectual substitute.

Contemporary Significance

THEOLOGY MATTERS. To hear Jeremiah's address today means to hear it through Jesus Christ, his gospel of forgiveness, and new life offered through him. In Jeremiah's day, the mantra of "the temple of the LORD" (Jer. 7:4) meant false reliance on the temple as God's guarantee of deliverance to the people of Judah. Can such words uncover modern tendencies to equate the visible church and participation in it with true service to God?

Jeremiah's address assumes a doctrine of Israel as God's people who assemble for worship and depart for service. Similarly, worship of God is the reason for Christian assembling, and service to him in word and deed is its goal. The temple was an institution by which God made himself present and known among the people. The church is an institution by which God makes himself present in the world and known among the nations.

One hears today the phrase that "theology matters." Its proponents believe that the visible church suffers from a lack of clarity about the uniqueness of the gospel, a diminished sense of authority for the classical tenets of the faith, and an overreliance on individualism and human experience as keys to Christian identity. Jeremiah denied that the popular expressions of sacrifice were an adequate indication of how individual Judeans or the nation as a whole should relate to God. The sacrificial system was one of God's gifts to be used by the people to maintain a relationship with God, though sacrifice was not a substitute for the relationship itself.

Theology does matter, not because God insists on a rigid intellectual system, but because unless we understand who God is, we will be in basic error about everything else that is ultimately important. The church will not save anyone (nor did the temple or animal sacrifice); it is a means to a goal, not the end itself. Understood correctly it is a means to know God and be rightly related to him.

One consequence of Jeremiah's address is the acknowledgment that the temple is not defined adequately as a building. Its theological significance resides in the Lord, whom it represents and reveals. Christians may legitimately draw positive or negative conclusions from this significance, depending on the nature of the church and the particulars of the Christian

life that need to be addressed. God can give (and has given) the faithless institutions of his people over to judgment. God has no need to protect a lifeless institution (as if his own security were under threat); yet the gates of hell themselves will not prevail against the church that confesses Christ as Lord.

Jeremiah's address means not only that "theology matters," but that it matters in the practical applications of the Christian life. His indictment of the immorality of the people illustrates the old adage that "I may not believe everything you say, but I believe everything you do." Behavior matters for it is a key to a person's or an institution's allegiance. Christian ethics, like the social institutions and actions of Jeremiah's day, are a means to an end: to worship and serve the living God.

Child sacrifice. The Topheth sacrifices of Jeremiah's day present the most intriguing illustration of the confession that "theology matters" as well as a graphic way of underscoring the radical uniqueness of the gospel. As noted above, child sacrifice was a supremely religious act. Specific reasons to sacrifice a child varied from extreme threat to the family to extreme devotion on the part of the parents. Jeremiah insists that God has not required this slaughter, either to get his attention or to demonstrate one's piety. Religious longing and commitment do not inherently result in good things. Such sentiments require instruction in the truth of God. This is a crucial point in an era where feelings and good intentions tend to be what really matter. Religious affections and longings need to be channeled in a proper direction. Pastors and the witness of faithful generations are vital to the cause of instruction in Christian practices.

In a Christological vein, the Topheth sacrifices remind readers that what God did not require of his people he provided in the death of his own Son. If the Topheth sacrifices gave occasion for God's insistence that he does not require the sacrifice of children either to please or appease him, then the death of Jesus Christ is the occasion where God replies back through the supremely sacrificial act of a self-offering for sin. In their misguided zeal, people who frequented the Topheth hoped to avert disaster and gain life for themselves and their families. In the death of Jesus, Christians meet God's own zeal to judge iniquity and his ardent desire to provide life for the lost.

Jeremiah 8:4-10:25

SAY TO THEM, 'This is what the LORD says:

""When men fall down, do they not get up? When a man turns away, does he not return?

⁵Why then have these people turned away? Why does Jerusalem always turn away?

They cling to deceit; they refuse to return.

⁶I have listened attentively, but they do not say what is right.

No one repents of his wickedness, saying, "What have I done?"

Each pursues his own course like a horse charging into battle.

⁷Even the stork in the sky knows her appointed seasons, and the dove, the swift and the thrush observe the time of their migration.

But my people do not know the requirements of the LORD.

8""How can you say, "We are wise, for we have the law of the LORD," when actually the lying pen of the scribes has handled it falsely?
9The wise will be put to shame;

The wise will be put to shame; they will be dismayed and trapped.

Since they have rejected the word of the LORD,

what kind of wisdom do they have?

¹⁰Therefore I will give their wives to other men

and their fields to new owners.
From the least to the greatest,
all are greedy for gain;
prophets and priests alike,
all practice deceit.

¹¹They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious.

"Peace, peace," they say, when there is no peace.

¹²Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct?

No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush.

So they will fall among the fallen; they will be brought down when they are punished,

says the LORD.

13"I will take away their harvest, declares the LORD.

There will be no grapes on the vine.
There will be no figs on the tree,
and their leaves will wither.
What I have given them

14"Why are we sitting here?
Gather together!
Let us flee to the fortified cities and perish there!

will be taken from them."

For the LORD our God has doomed us to perish

and given us poisoned water to drink, because we have sinned against him.

but no good has come, for a time of healing but there was only terror.

16 The snorting of the enemy's horses is heard from Dan;
at the neighing of their stallions the whole land trembles.
They have come to devour the land and everything in it, the city and all who live there."

17"See, I will send venomous snakes among you, vipers that cannot be charmed, and they will bite you,"

declares the LORD.

18O my Comforter in sorrow, my heart is faint within me.
19Listen to the cry of my people from a land far away:
"Is the LORD not in Zion?
Is her King no longer there?"
"Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their worthless foreign idols?"

20"The harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved."
21Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me.
22Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?
Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?
9:1Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears!
I would weep day and night

for the slain of my people.

²Oh, that I had in the desert a lodging place for travelers, so that I might leave my people and go away from them; for they are all adulterers, a crowd of unfaithful people.

3"They make ready their tongue like a bow, to shoot lies; it is not by truth that they triumph in the land. They go from one sin to another; they do not acknowledge me," declares the LORD.

4"Beware of your friends; do not trust your brothers.
For every brother is a deceiver, and every friend a slanderer.
⁵Friend deceives friend, and no one speaks the truth.
They have taught their tongues to lie; they weary themselves with sinning.
⁶You live in the midst of deception; in their deceit they refuse to acknowledge me,"

declares the LORD.

⁷Therefore this is what the LORD Almighty says:
"See I will refine and test them

"See, I will refine and test them, for what else can I do because of the sin of my people?

⁸Their tongue is a deadly arrow; it speaks with deceit.

With his mouth each speaks cordially to his neighbor,

but in his heart he sets a trap for him.

9Should I not punish them for this?" declares the LORD. "Should I not avenge myself on such a nation as this?"

¹⁰I will weep and wail for the mountains and take up a lament concerning the desert pastures.

They are desolate and untraveled, and the lowing of cattle is not heard. The birds of the air have fled and the animals are gone.

11"I will make Jerusalem a heap of ruins, a haunt of jackals; and I will lay waste the towns of Judah so no one can live there."

¹²What man is wise enough to understand this? Who has been instructed by the LORD and can explain it? Why has the land been ruined and laid waste like a desert that no one can cross?

13The LORD said, "It is because they have forsaken my law, which I set before them; they have not obeyed me or followed my law. ¹⁴Instead, they have followed the stubbornness of their hearts; they have followed the Baals, as their fathers taught them." ¹⁵Therefore, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "See, I will make this people eat bitter food and drink poisoned water. ¹⁶I will scatter them among nations that neither they nor their fathers have known, and I will pursue them with the sword until I have destroyed them."

¹⁷This is what the Lord Almighty says:

"Consider now! Call for the wailing women to come;

send for the most skillful of them.

¹⁸Let them come quickly and wail over us

till our eyes overflow with tears and water streams from our eyelids.

¹⁹The sound of wailing is heard from Zion: 'How ruined we are! How great is our shame!

We must leave our land because our houses are in ruins."

Now, O women, hear the word of the LORD;open your ears to the words of his mouth.

Teach your daughters how to wail; teach one another a lament.

²¹Death has climbed in through our windows

and has entered our fortresses;

it has cut off the children from the streets and the young men from the public squares.

²²Say, "This is what the LORD declares:

"The dead bodies of men will lie like refuse on the open field, like cut grain behind the reaper, with no one to gather them."

²³This is what the LORD says:

"Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, ²⁴but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me,
that I am the LORD, who exercises
kindness,
justice and righteousness on earth,
for in these I delight,"
declares the LORD.

²⁵"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh—²⁶Egypt, Judah, Edom, Ammon, Moab and all who live in the desert in distant places. For all these nations are really uncircumcised, and even the whole house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart."

^{10:1}Hear what the Lord says to you, O house of Israel. ²This is what the Lord says:

"Do not learn the ways of the nations or be terrified by signs in the sky, though the nations are terrified by them.

³For the customs of the peoples are worthless;
they cut a tree out of the forest,
and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel.
⁴They adorn it with silver and gold;
they fasten it with hammer and nails so it will not totter.
⁵Like a scarecrow in a melon patch,
their idols cannot speak;
they must be carried because they cannot walk.

Do not fear them; they can do no harm nor can they do any good."

⁶No one is like you, O LORD; you are great,

and your name is mighty in power.

⁷Who should not revere you, O King of the nations? This is your due.

Among all the wise men of the nations and in all their kingdoms, there is no one like you.

⁸They are all senseless and foolish; they are taught by worthless wooden idols.

⁹Hammered silver is brought from Tarshish and gold from Uphaz.

What the craftsman and goldsmith have made

is then dressed in blue and purple—all made by skilled workers.

10 But the LORD is the true God;he is the living God, the eternal King.When he is angry, the earth trembles;

the nations cannot endure his wrath.

¹¹"Tell them this: 'These gods, who did not make the heavens and the earth, will perish from the earth and from under the heavens.'"

¹²But God made the earth by his power; he founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding.

13When he thunders, the waters in the heavens roar; he makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth.

He sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses.

¹⁴Everyone is senseless and without knowledge;

every goldsmith is shamed by his idols.

His images are a fraud;

they have no breath in them.

¹⁵They are worthless, the objects of mockery;

when their judgment comes, they will perish.

¹⁶He who is the Portion of Jacob is not like these,

for he is the Maker of all things, including Israel, the tribe of his inheritance

the LORD Almighty is his name.

¹⁷Gather up your belongings to leave the land,

you who live under siege.

¹⁸For this is what the LORD says:

"At this time I will hurl out those who live in this land;

I will bring distress on them so that they may be captured."

¹⁹Woe to me because of my injury! My wound is incurable!

Yet I said to myself,

"This is my sickness, and I must endure it."

²⁰My tent is destroyed; all its ropes are snapped.

My sons are gone from me and are no more;

no one is left now to pitch my tent or to set up my shelter.

²¹The shepherds are senseless

and do not inquire of the LORD; so they do not prosper and all their flock is scattered.

22 Listen! The report is coming—a great commotion from the land of the north!

It will make the towns of Judah desolate, a haunt of jackals.

²³I know, O LORD, that a man's life is not his own;
 it is not for man to direct his steps.
 ²⁴Correct me, LORD, but only with justice

not in your anger,
lest you reduce me to nothing.

25Pour out your wrath on the nations
that do not acknowledge you,
on the peoples who do not call on your
name.

For they have devoured Jacob; they have devoured him completely and destroyed his homeland.

Original Meaning

THIS SECTION CONTINUES the book's proclamation of judgment on Judah and Jerusalem. It is similar to the collection of poetic oracles in chapters 4–6, which was "interrupted" by the prose sermon in 7:1–8:3; it continues with the same theme and even repeats sayings used previously. These verses are not an original unit of address but are brought together by the compilers of the book to demonstrate that Jeremiah had spoken God's word to a foolish and obdurate people. As is common throughout Jeremiah 1–25, specific dates and precise allusions to political events are seldom given. These oracles function as witnesses to the prophetic preaching that was ignored by the people of Judah and Jerusalem. In a poignant dialogical style, Jeremiah represents his sorrow and frustration as also belonging to God.

8:4–12. The prophet engages his hearers with rhetorical questions and accuses them of moral stupidity and a culpable spiritual dullness. Speaking for God, the prophet states: "I have listened attentively, but they do not say what is right" (v. 6). It is also assumed that the people of Jerusalem do not do what is right. God is almost incredulous at the stupidity of the people. Verse 7 continues a theme seen elsewhere in Jeremiah: God's people are woefully and willfully ignorant of God's "requirements" of behavior, which are designed to regulate life. Even a stork knows that there are appointed seasons, yet God's own people seem clueless.

To the reply from the people in verse 8 that they are indeed "wise" and "have the law [tora] of the LORD," Jeremiah charges that scribal interpretation has made God's truth into a lie (šeqer, cf. "deception" in 7:4 [NIV "deceptive"]). The deceitful interpretation of God's instruction is explained as blunting its judgmental force against iniquity. God's Torah is wisdom (see Deut. 4:5–8). Priest and prophet alike are proclaiming "peace" when all is not well. This too is a theme Jeremiah stresses elsewhere (cf. Jer. 6:14). The charge that the people are shameless and don't even know how to blush is likewise found in 6:15.

The context offers few clues for more clarity on this dispute over the interpretation of God's Torah, but possibly we have here Jeremiah's accusations about the eventual collapse of Josiah's covenant reforms. Religious leaders might have blunted the sharp edge of those reforms sparked by a (re)discovery of a book of the Torah of the Lord during temple repairs (2 Kings 22–23). It is a pity that we don't have any more clues to the sharp retort of the prophet that the lying pen of the scribes has handled the Torah falsely. Presumably the interpretive skills of the priests² have kept God's Word from performing its basic tasks of challenging and instructing the people, as if they have explained away the force of divine imperatives. Jeremiah himself was from a priestly family and thus familiar with the tasks of interpreting and applying divine instruction.

8:13–17. The people belatedly realize that God's judgment is upon them. Jeremiah depicts them as coming to the sudden and terrifying realization that the enemy is approaching and that God is in the process of judging them for their transgressions. The reference to the enemy horses at Dan indicates that the enemy is approaching from the north. Dan was at the northern border of the northern kingdom of Israel.

The unrealistic hope of the people for peace is now seen for what the previous passage indicated it always was: self-delusion and a rejection of God's law. "Poisoned water" in verse 14 likely refers to the problems with water stored in cisterns rather than to some form of divine action in actually poisoning wells. Sieges typically result in heavy reliance on poor resources stored in cisterns (cf. 9:15). Perhaps we should read verse 17 similarly: The "venomous snakes" that the Lord will send denote the deadly work of the invaders.

8:18–22. Scholars are divided over the compositional breakdown of these verses. Are they a single unit of poetic address, or are they joined secondarily for thematic reasons by the compilers of the book? Interpreters are also divided over the implied speakers throughout this unit, since it is difficult to tell at some points whether the voice is Jeremiah's or the Lord's. A suggested outline for 8:18–22 is as follows:

[prophet] O my Comforter in sorrow, my heart is faint within me. Listen to the cry of my people from a land far away: "Is the LORD not in Zion? Is her King no longer there?" [Lord] "Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their worthless foreign idols?" [prophet, quoting the people] "The harvest is past, the summer has ended. and we are not saved." [prophet] Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?

Jeremiah's prophetic poignancy demonstrates that he is not aloof or indifferent to the suffering of the people. Indeed, three times (8:19, 21–22)

the people are called "my daughter people," a phrase appropriate also in the mouth of God. This point should not be lost on the reader. The sorrow Jeremiah feels at the fate of his people is that felt by God as well. Prophetic person and prophetic message converge to reveal not only the God of righteous judgment but the God of sorrows at the plaintive cry, "We are not saved."

9:1–11. As with the previous section, readers encounter a merging of Jeremiah and God's voices. Pain over the plight of the people results in daylong weeping, yet also in the desire to be absent from their self-destructive treachery to the Lord's instructions. Verses 3 and 6 conclude with the formula "declares the LORD," marking the depiction of immorality and deceit as a communication from God. A suggestion of "voices" for 9:1–11 is as follows:

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[prophet] 9:1-2: "Oh, that my head were a spring of water..."
[God] 9:3: "They make ready their tongue like a bow, to shoot lies...."
[God to Jeremiah] 9:4-6: "Beware of your friends...."
[prophet, speaking for God] 9:7-11: "See, I will refine and test them ... I will weep and wail...."
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If this sequence of voices is correct, we have a conversation between God and prophet in 9:1–6, followed by an announcement of judgment on the people in 9:7–11. Note that in verse 10 God weeps and wails (like Jeremiah) for the destruction to come.

9:12–22. Picking up the theme of wisdom and judgment from chapter 8, the rhetorical question of spiritual discernment is again raised in a series of divine oracles. Note the introductory formula for divine communication (e.g., "The LORD said") in 9:13, 17, 22. Judgment has fallen on Judah for her sins. Following the Baals⁴ is a blatant example of the people's folly.

Mourning cries mark the demise of shameful Judah. Exile is upon them. Death too has arrived and is personified as climbing into homes and roaming the doomed cities of Judah. Verses 17 and 20 refer to wailing women; they presuppose that women played a leading role in funeral

lamentation. The poetry associated with funeral lamentation is known as qina.⁵

A precise context for these prophecies is not given. Perhaps they reflect the initial Babylonian constriction of Jerusalem under Nebuchadnezzar in 598/597 or the devastating drought mentioned elsewhere in Jeremiah (14:1–6).

9:23–26. These verses are further prophetic responses to the previous announcement of judgment. Verses 23–24 return again to the theme of wisdom in such a time as this. With verse 25 comes the typical introduction to a prophetic depiction of the future ("days are coming ..."). Note that markers for divine saying are found in each of verses 23–25.

Verses 23–24 are almost proverbial in form. There is a valid form of boasting, which comes with the realization of correct priorities. True wisdom is not only the recognition that God has sent judgment on Judah; it is above all knowledge of the Lord and his character. God reveals himself as One who practices and takes delight in kindness (*ḥesed*), justice (*mišpat*), and righteousness (*ṣedaqa*). As verses 25–26 make clear, those nations who spurn the moral integrity of God—whether Egypt or Israel, circumcised or not—will see his judgment. The criticism of Israel as uncircumcised of heart picks up a theme from 4:4.

10:1–16. These verses contain an extended critique of idolatry and affirmations of the Lord as Ruler over all. Idolatry is described and defined variously. Verse 2 refers to astrological divination ("signs in the sky"). Verses 3–5 criticize the making and veneration of a wooden image. Verse 9 notes that a wooden piece can be decorated with silver and gold and clothed in royal colors—but this does not make it divine. Verse 11 is a proverb written in Aramaic, which has been incorporated into the critique of idolatry. Perhaps it is a traditional saying that the prophet adopts here for emphasis. Divine images are succinctly judged in 10:15 with the claim that they are "worthless, the objects of mockery."

The lifeless images of other deities are contrasted with the uniqueness of the "living God," who is the Creator of heaven and earth (10:10–12). His cosmic kingship is twice affirmed (vv. 7, 10). This God, the "Maker of all things," is also the "Portion of Jacob"; Israel is the tribe of his inheritance (10:16). Even the wisdom from other nations is folly compared to God's truth.

Much of this section is intended to instruct Israel and Judah in the time of the Exile. Not that it is irrelevant to the circumstances of Judah before the Babylonian onslaught, but the text is cast in a teaching mode rather than as a list of reasons why Israel is being judged. Note how the text begins. The house of Israel is called to avoid the ways of the nations. Assimilation, if not downright capitulation, to a dominant culture was a real issue for Israelites and Judeans among other nations. Idolatry is folly. When other nations talk about creation, God's people are reminded that the real Creator of heaven and earth is none other than the God of Israel.

10:17–22. The topic and setting change from the previous section. Apparently Jerusalem herself is addressed as one besieged, who recognizes that her predicament has no cure. The foe from the north will make an end to Judah. One may see the voices in 10:17–22 as follows:

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[prophet to Jerusalem] 10:17–18: "Gather up your belongings...."
[Jerusalem to herself] 10:19–20: "Woe to me because of my injury!..."
[prophet to Jerusalem] 10:21–22: "The shepherds are senseless and do not inquire of the Lord...."
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As with a number of poetic oracles, the change of voices raises the question of how this material was presented in oral form. Perhaps the prophet acted out the poetry, using different voices, or he may have been assisted by someone like Baruch, his secretary and assistant.

10:23–25. The poetic collection of 8:4–10:25 concludes with the prayer of a chastened individual. The speaker is almost certainly Jeremiah; the question is whether he speaks primarily autobiographically (i.e., personally) or as a member of a wounded and judged people. The prayer contains a frank admission that human resources themselves are not enough to keep a person on the pathway marked out by God. God is humbly implored to correct the errant ways of the one who prays—but in a manner that reveals God's justice and that does not continue in judgment (as is appropriate for those who do not know the Lord).

There is more wisdom than resignation in the way the prayer begins. A person does not ultimately direct his or her own pathways; rather, they are

in the hands of God. Recognition of this fact is a first step toward wisdom. Much of the prayer is about justice: God is implored to judge the enemy who has devoured Jacob.

Bridging Contexts

WISDOM AND FOOLISHNESS. Several of the prophetic judgments offered in this section partake of the theme of wisdom and foolishness. In doing so, the prophecies echo themes and vocabulary found elsewhere in the Bible and thus indicate broader contexts in which later readers may see the significance of Jeremiah's words.

Judah and Jerusalem are accused of a woeful ignorance in their lack of comprehension over their plight before the Lord and his coming judgment. God's people should have the moral and spiritual comprehension necessary to see the folly of their ways and the consequences to come. Birds know the times of migration, but God's people do not know his "requirements" (8:7). A wise person should understand what is happening to God's people (9:12); indeed, the truly wise person knows the Lord and the activities in which he delights (9:23–24). Even the supposed wisdom among the nations is folly compared to the Lord. The superstition (magical assumptions) of pagan religions marks them as senseless, and their idols as worthless (10:1–16).

Other prophets take up the theme of the culpable ignorance of God's people. Isaiah announces the astounding fact that God's chosen family knows less than the ox or donkey (Isa. 1:2–3). Idolatry too is a parade example of folly and lack of spiritual discernment (Jer. 44:6–23). Hosea compares Ephraim to a silly dove (Hos. 7:11); true wisdom sees the righteousness of God's ways and acts accordingly (14:9). The wise should recognize that God's judgment is both punishment and tragedy; punishment is due to one who is morally responsible, yet it is a tragedy because God's people were instructed to act otherwise, and they should have known better.

The wisdom traditions of the Bible are replete with examples of the wise and foolish, the righteous and the wicked. Both Proverbs and James provide wisdom vocabulary appropriate for discerning God's ways in the world and expressing his will for the common life of his people. Jesus used the examples of wise and foolish to illustrate the importance of spiritual discernment. How is it, he asks, that people who discern weather patterns

through observation cannot grasp the significance of his presence among them (Luke 12:54–56)? Those who do hear his word and act on it, however, are like the wise person who builds a house on bedrock (Matt. 7:24–27).

As with this section of Jeremiah, the wisdom traditions call for knowledge of God and discernment of the times. These two aspects go together. Knowledge of God is more than familiarity with his Word; it is the gift of discerning his will for the times at hand and committing oneself to it in joyful obedience. The wise person should be a keen observer of culture and history, using God's past dealings with people and things as examples from which to learn.

The prophet's anguish. The articulation of Jeremiah's anguish over the spiritual folly and rampant immorality of the people links these prophecies together and puts them in a larger biblical context. The prophetic office meant that those whom God called as prophets were mediators of his message to the people. This privilege did not separate them from the people but instead bound them to the people. For the brokenness of the people Jeremiah himself felt broken (Jer. 8:21).

Jeremiah's weeping comes from his experience of the people's folly and his knowledge of God's resolve to judge them. It also represents God's own sorrow at their folly. "What else can I do?" God asks in sorrow (9:7). The anguish of God and prophet finds parallels in Hosea 11:1–9 and above all in the anguish of God's Son, who wept over the city that killed prophets and that would be the site of his crucifixion (Luke 13:34–35; 19:41–44).

Contemporary Significance

LEARNING FROM JUDAH. To comprehend the failures of Judah and Jerusalem and to learn from them, the church should ask hard questions about its own life and witness in the contexts in which God has placed it. Jeremiah charged his contemporaries with adultery, iniquity, and immorality. Since these sins are part of the fabric of Western society, the question of the church's complicity in or tolerance of them raises serious questions about the quality of its witness and its future. Regarding the prophetic charges of idolatry and polytheism, the church may not officially promote worship of other deities,8 but the manner of its worship and the

quality of its life may indicate ways in which it gives undue allegiance to culturally relative things.

Sermons and lessons that seek to be faithful to these prophetic words of Jeremiah should not necessarily limit themselves to exposing what is wrong. Just to be "against" things may have an initial appeal, but the church has more to do than point out the failures in either its own witness or in the common life of society. Christians must also look to these texts for indications of the righteousness and worship that God expects from his people. Perhaps the biggest shock for a Western audience in hearing these words is a prediction of judgment to come; but if so, there ought to be lamentation as well, in recognition of failure before God ("harvest is past ... and we are not saved;" Jer. 8:20), and fervent prayer that God will use judgment as correcting action (10:24).

Portraits of sin. Among these judgmental prophecies are several portraits of sin, whose profiles are instructive to believers of any age. For example, in 8:8–12 Jeremiah castigates the religious leaders whose self-conveyed wisdom blunts the force of God's Word for the present. Whatever the precise historical circumstances behind this charge (see comments above), it is likely that Jeremiah has more in mind than legitimate differences over interpreting God's Word. Jeremiah perceives a crisis in moral authority and action, an inability on the part of the people to perceive their plight before God, and a brazen refusal to consider change.

The charge to Judah that people no longer blush over shameful circumstances (8:12) should strike a resonant chord with modern Christians in the West who are confronted daily with their culture's hedonistic values. How can religious leaders proclaim that all is well when it is not? They seem to represent what a modern person might call "Band-Aid theology," a misguided understanding of God as cosmic grandparent who clucks over the foibles of grandchildren and assures them that it is only a skinned knee that will get better soon. This is a wholesale rejection of the biblical portrait of God, who indicates in his Word that people are dead in their sins apart from his intervention through acts of judgment and redemption. If one rejects the biblical message that indicates the gravity and culpability of human sinfulness, then what means are left for humankind to see its plight before the Creator, who is the Judge of heaven and earth?

Jeremiah's words indicate a lack of integrity on the part of Judah and Jerusalem. His examples include the charge that people say one thing and plan another (Jer. 9:3–5, 8). Lying is a type of social treachery. James recognizes the power for good or evil that resides in the tongue and the way in which human speech can mask human pretensions for control and abuse (James 3:1–18). We do well to examine the ways in which words are used as subterfuge or code language in society to mask exploitation, the ways in which "good" words serve as poor substitutes for deeds, and ways in which words become labels to demonize and divide. If Christians are people who look to God's Word for guidance and instruction, then the integrity of their witness is measured in part by the ways in which they describe reality and treat one another.

Role of the prophet. Jeremiah's anguish over the folly of God's people indicates both the passion of the prophetic office to proclaim God's Word and the passion of God to correct and redeem that which is lost. There are two instructive parts to this side of prophet and deity. (1) The role of Christians and the church in engaging the world requires a passionate identification with the folly of the world. Those who would offer a grave spiritual diagnosis must love the patients and not stand aloof from them. This is a model of the church, which is not only the recipient of a judgmental word from Jeremiah, but also which, by God's grace, seeks a prophetic ministry among society's ills. Jeremiah may be a prophetic reminder of the deep sorrow that should meet all Christians when they reflect on the circumstances of those who do not know God. The lost are, after all, estranged siblings of the Lord, who wept and died for them.

(2) God's anguish and anger are, in reality, the only basis for hope in this world. His passions grow from love; the opposite of love is not anger but indifference. Were God indifferent to the predicament of a fallen creation, there would have been no prophetic ministry in Israel and no Son to engage evil and to die to expend its curse.

Among these prophecies of judgment readers will also find indications of what God intends for his people in their corporate life. These are the marks of the wisdom Jeremiah finds lacking among his generation, but which James calls "wisdom that comes from heaven" (James 3:17). Among such marks are the recognition of repentance as a conscious rejection of evil, an embracing of God's standards for moral integrity, a willingness to hear

God's Word as judgment on human pretensions and sinfulness, a passion for those whose folly has trapped them in evil consequences, a humble boasting in the sufficiency of God whose own ways are just and right, and an aversion to idolatry whereby someone or something becomes the supreme value for people's affections rather than the one God of heaven and earth.

Jeremiah 11:1–17

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²"Listen to the terms of this covenant and tell them to the people of Judah and to those who live in Jerusalem. ³Tell them that this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Cursed is the man who does not obey the terms of this covenant—⁴the terms I commanded your forefathers when I brought them out of Egypt, out of the iron-smelting furnace.' I said, 'Obey me and do everything I command you, and you will be my people, and I will be your God. ⁵Then I will fulfill the oath I swore to your forefathers, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey'—the land you possess today."

I answered, "Amen, LORD."

⁶The LORD said to me, "Proclaim all these words in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem: 'Listen to the terms of this covenant and follow them. ⁷From the time I brought your forefathers up from Egypt until today, I warned them again and again, saying, "Obey me." ⁸But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubbornness of their evil hearts. So I brought on them all the curses of the covenant I had commanded them to follow but that they did not keep."

⁹Then the LORD said to me, "There is a conspiracy among the people of Judah and those who live in Jerusalem. ¹⁰They have returned to the sins of their forefathers, who refused to listen to my words. They have followed other gods to serve them. Both the house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken the covenant I made with their forefathers. ¹¹Therefore this is what the LORD says: 'I will bring

on them a disaster they cannot escape. Although they cry out to me, I will not listen to them. ¹²The towns of Judah and the people of Jerusalem will go and cry out to the gods to whom they burn incense, but they will not help them at all when disaster strikes. ¹³You have as many gods as you have towns, O Judah; and the altars you have set up to burn incense to that shameful god Baal are as many as the streets of Jerusalem.'

¹⁴"Do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them, because I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their distress.

15"What is my beloved doing in my temple as she works out her evil schemes with many?
Can consecrated meat avert your punishment?
When you engage in your wickedness, then you rejoice."
16The LORD called you a thriving olive tree with fruit beautiful in form.
But with the roar of a mighty storm he will set it on fire, and its branches will be broken.

¹⁷The LORD Almighty, who planted you, has decreed disaster for you, because the house of Israel and the house of Judah have done evil and provoked me to anger by burning incense to Baal.

Original Meaning

THIS PASSAGE IS composed essentially in prose and is concerned with the covenant-breaking activities of Judah and Jerusalem. Verses 15–16 are poetry and are included with the prose material as further commentary on

the failure of the people. In these two verses a female is addressed in judgment. Most likely it is Jerusalem in her personified role of representing the people. The text offers no specific date in Jeremiah's ministry for these words from the Lord.

A closer examination of this section indicates that there are subunits within it. Verses 1–5 comprise the initial unit, an address from God to Jeremiah that instructs the prophet about the people's failures to maintain fidelity to "this covenant" (vv. 2–3; cf. vv. 6, 8, 10). Jeremiah responds with the affirmation "amen" to this initial revelation from the Lord. Perhaps his response is patterned on the list of curses for covenant disobedience in Deuteronomy 27:15–26, where an "amen" (= "indeed" or "so be it") follows each curse listed.

Verses 6–14 offer a second communication from God given to the prophet, the bulk of which is comprised of two paragraphs (vv. 6–8, 9–13), each one introduced by "the LORD said to me." These verses still retain the first-person element in the report ("me"), though their content is clearly intended for the people. Jeremiah is the human vessel to deliver them.

The Lord recognizes that much, if not all, of Jeremiah's report to the people will fall on deaf ears and hard hearts. As a result, the prophet is commanded not to pray for the people (11:14; cf. 7:16). We ought to remember that these somber words are intended as instruction for the people rather than as simply a message for the prophet. Even though one of the callings of a prophet was to intercede with the Lord in prayer, 11:14 assumes that intercession will do no good because the people will remain incorrigible (note esp. v. 17).

Scholars often point out similarities between the prose sections in this address and the words of Moses in Deuteronomy, although they differ on the degree of similarity and its significance. More specifically, scholars are divided over the historical relationship of prose material like this with the poetic oracles in the book of Jeremiah; some attribute the prose addresses to Jeremiah's editors who produced the book during the latter period of the Babylonian exile, while others see the prose style as part of Jeremiah's ministry along with the (originally) oral poetry. With respect to 11:1–17, the verses appear to be a summary of reflections on the failure of Judah and Jerusalem to keep God's covenant (below) rather than a report of the prophet's actual presentation to the people. In written form they

communicate to readers the essence of Jeremiah's message about the consequences of covenant infidelity.

Two conclusions may be stated from this succinct analysis. (1) God's people have broken "this covenant," and the prophet's task is to communicate that message to them. (2) There are consequences for disobedience, in that judgment will fall on the people. For readers of the material in chapters 1-10, there is little new in these two conclusions except the emphasis on the term "covenant" (b^e rit).²

Details in 11:1–17 offer further perspective on the term *covenant*, but they also leave a number of things assumed on the part of hearers/readers. "This covenant" is something God "commanded" the ancestors of Judah and Jerusalem (11:4, 10), who were slaves in Egypt. Their redemption from such slavery is the presupposition of the covenant. Obedience to what God commanded Israel to do is expected, since he redeemed Israel and they belong to him. "This covenant" also includes as part of its content an "oath" (*bu'a*) God swore to the ancestors, a promise that the land of Canaan would belong to their descendants. According to 11:4b God asked for obedience to his word and promised, "You will be my people, and I will be your God." This last phrase states succinctly the essence of the covenant (cf. Ex. 19:3b–6; Lev. 26:12; Jer. 24:7; 31:33; Ezek. 11:20; Zech. 8:8), from which blessings like children and land would emerge.

One may compare the basic marriage formulation ("I will be your husband, and you will be my wife") with that of the covenant between God and Israel. They are linguistically similar formulations, and both presuppose an exclusive, intimate relationship as the basis on which a broader community is built.⁴ Thus, the covenant was predicated on God's gifts of deliverance and instruction, it is extended by him to the people, and it also contained curses for the people's disobedience to the covenant stipulations (Jer. 11:3, 8, 11).⁵ Accusations in 11:9–13 that Judah venerates other gods is a violation of the covenant God established with the people (Deut. 5:7–10) and the reason for reminding them of the curses for disobedience.

As the previous comments indicate, the particulars of Jer. 11:1–17 assume a historical and theological context for the first hearers and readers that spans the biblical storyline from the promises to Abraham and descendants, the deliverance of the ancestors from Egypt, covenant-making at Mount Sinai, and guidance to the Promised Land. But there is more to be

considered with respect to Jeremiah's own lifetime. King Josiah had undertaken a movement for covenant renewal (2 Kings 22–23) by calling Judah back to the fundamental principles of the Sinai/Horeb covenant. He read to the assembled people from the newly discovered book of the covenant (probably Deuteronomy), he officiated at a ceremony of covenant-making, and the people responded affirmatively from their side (23:1–3). His reforming efforts coincided with the call of the young Jeremiah.

Two elements about the role of Josiah's reforming activity may help in interpreting Jer. 11:1–17. (1) The book of Deuteronomy is essentially a covenant-renewal document, for it reports the last addresses of Moses to the Israelites prior to his death. Moses emphasized that it was time for the younger generation who came out of Egypt to respond affirmatively to the covenant claim that God had on them. He mediated with them a covenant-renewal ceremony on the plains of Moab. This set a pattern that Josiah would follow. Jeremiah, a prophet like Moses for his generation (cf. Deut. 18:18), takes up a similar role of calling the people back to their first love and reminding them of the consequences.

(2) Moses commanded that the words of God's Torah be read every seven years at the Festival of Booths (Deut. 31:9–13). It is possible that Jeremiah's "sermon" as summarized in Jeremiah 11 is influenced by the prophet's support for the covenant reform measures instituted earlier by Josiah (although they seem to have been short-lived) as well as by the opportunity to reflect on God's covenantal instructions as they were read periodically in Judah.⁷

Bridging Contexts

COVENANT CONTEXT. This prose address has many links with other material in Jeremiah. Even where there is no reference to a covenant, much of Jeremiah's criticisms of Israel and Judah are derived from their failure to maintain the covenant responsibilities God granted them when he called them to be his people. And after judgment, when Jeremiah projects a transformed future for Israel and Judah, his prophecy depicts a "new covenant," when God will grant new privileges to his covenant-breaking but chastened people (Jer. 31:31–34). From one angle of vision, therefore,

the address in chapter 11 is a summary statement of Jeremiah's criticisms of the people and indications that judgment for failure is on the horizon.

From another angle of vision, the repeated references to "this covenant" provide a broader scriptural context in which to interpret the address. For Jeremiah's audience and the Jewish generations to follow, the term *covenant* evoked strong associations with God, who had freely bound himself to them through promises. A promise extended is different from a contract mutually agreed to, although both covenant and contract in the ancient world could be sealed by sacrificial ceremony and solemn oaths. The latter are part of the covenant-making tradition in the Old Testament (Gen. 15:1–21; Ex. 24:1–8).

A covenant is somewhat different from a treaty, however, although they were similar in the ancient world. Solomon and Hiram of Tyre, for example, made an agreement between themselves that is called a covenant (b^e rit, see 1 Kings 5:12[26], NIV "treaty"). The arrangement instituted between the two individuals was likely a parity agreement. A covenant extended by God to anyone else is by definition a gift from the greater to the lesser.

The Old Testament never uses the word "covenant" in the plural to refer to the various covenants God granted to Israel⁸ and sets no specific chronological limits when a covenant is instituted, although a covenant may or may not have specific conditions attached to it for the covenant partner. For example, God's covenant with creation is a promise that does not have conditions placed on creation, whereas God's covenant with Israel does have conditions associated with the promises God makes to the people. The people have obligations to meet as part of the covenant graciously granted to them.

The Old Testament frequently calls the Sinai/Horeb (or Mosaic) covenant God's covenant; it is never called Israel's covenant. This contrast has important theological ramifications. The Sinai covenant was a gift from God to Israel. It was conditional in that it could be broken by Israel's disobedience. A covenant is not something that Israel might extend to God. Within the structure of the covenant granted to Israel were blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience.

In the modern Western world the term *covenant* is still used in some wedding ceremonies to depict the solemn and sacred relationship of marriage—a usage similar to that in the Old Testament prophecies of Hosea

and Jeremiah—but it is not used much any more to describe social relationships. The term evokes a strong sense of commitment to a relationship. As noted above, the formula for marriage and for the covenant God established with Israel were similar. Nevertheless, a modern parity commitment differs from the biblical sense of a covenant; God grants the covenant unilaterally to someone like David or the people of Israel, and it conveys primarily a self-binding promise/oath graciously granted rather than a negotiated relationship.

The judgment Jeremiah announces for covenant disobedience has two key elements. (1) The offended party (God) has the right to judge infidelity. (2) Israel responded to God's gracious invitation to covenant fellowship with an oath of obedience and an acknowledgment of curses to fall for disobedience. Not only is God just in announcing judgment, but Israel is self-inflicted with the curses of the covenant to which it agreed were proper.

New covenant and Jesus Christ. Finally, another angle of vision sees Jeremiah's judgment speech in light of his prophecy of a new covenant (31:31–34) to come, a covenant that ultimately Christ initiated through his death and resurrection (Matt. 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:17–20; 1 Cor. 11:23–26; Heb. 8:6–13; 10:1–39). What God demanded by way of covenant fidelity (as Heb. 10:26–39 reminds Christian readers) are the very things God has given as gifts through the obedience of his Son. Here is one element of the "bridge" between Jeremiah 11:1–17 and the modern world. Christians have been given the gift of a new covenant in Christ in spite of their failures to live up to the standards God has set. This is the gospel.

Christ is God's self-binding promise, gaining for his people that which they are incapable of gaining for themselves. Through him come demands for discipleship, what one might call the gracious stipulations of the "new covenant." In reading Jeremiah 11, it is not the announcement of judgment for covenant disobedience that should cause surprise on the part of readers, old or new; rather, it is the larger biblical claim that God will continue to pursue people such as these and even to offer his own Son as a self-binding gift of new life to them. One can grasp the radical nature of grace and forgiveness only when one recognizes that judgment for failure is what we deserve and should have expected.

EMPHASIZING THE NEGATIVE. As with all biblical texts announcing divine judgment, an interpreter of the Bible who seeks contemporary application must decide whether a similar announcement is called for or whether the text is best applied as positive instruction for the present through negative examples from the history of God's people. If the decision is the former, then Jeremiah's accusation of covenant-breaking becomes an example of prophetic preaching where the failure to heed divine instruction results in the temporal judgment of God's people.

In Christian theology, God's judgment for failure may fall on those who reject Christ's call to discipleship and spurn the truth of the gospel; God has established a covenant of peace and eternal salvation through Christ, and to reject that means of salvation is to reject the only means offered. Unrepentant Christians and faithless churches open themselves to temporal judgments (and even beyond) by their rejection of what God has offered them through Christ.

Emphasizing the positive. Jeremiah's announcement of judgment for covenant infidelity can offer positive instruction to the church through its insistence on the power of promises made. In essence, the covenant began with God's promise of commitment to his people, and it sought commitment and fidelity in return. The fragile nature of human commitment in modern society is constantly under threat as marriages end, friendships fail, churches turn their back on neighborhood needs, and fidelity to God takes a back seat to many other things clamoring for time and attention. In a mobile society where the pace of life is swift, the place of enduring commitments is easily crowded out. These things are easily illustrated from modern life; the question for reflection is the extent of the damages that such societal forces inflict on (or will eventually lead to) the life of God's people.

Two current movements in North American society illustrate the significance of human commitment to responsible life. Others could be named, and a way in which the contemporary significance of Jeremiah 11 could be explored comes in naming such movements. Both of these movements emerge from the recognition that modern society (for a variety of reasons) has devalued enduring commitments, debased the significance of personal integrity, and pushed people into the folly of the "blame game," where it is always someone else's fault.

The first illustration is the movement led by Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam. This is a powerful force in the African American community, which takes seriously the potential for societal improvement based on responsible commitments of African American men and women. It is not a Christian movement, and its rhetoric against Jews is reprehensible, but it is based on solemn commitments of a theological nature. One need not embrace either Islam or the separatist nationalism of this movement to recognize that it has touched something deep in the African American community, something that guides men in the ways of responsible activity. Its deserved negative connotations should not blind Christians to its emphases on community, discipline, and piety that have made constructive differences in some of the most difficult neighborhoods in America, along with an impressive record of working with convicted felons in prisons to assist them in changing patterns of destructive behavior and in lowering the rates of recidivism.

The second illustration is the avowedly evangelical movement of the Promise Keepers, led by Bill McCartney. It calls men to commit themselves through the power of the Holy Spirit to lives of fidelity to and responsibility before God. Promise Keepers doctrine assumes that God is the primary Promise Keeper and that Christian men are called to respond in kind.

Listening carefully to Jeremiah's sermon should keep one from concentrating solely on what's wrong with society, although a critical assessment will have plenty of material with which to work. Jeremiah's critique is extended to people who should know better but who have taken the easy way out. Such a word goes first to the church, since it ought to know better on a number of fronts.

The need for transformation. It is also a mistake simply to assume that people who try harder will succeed in their commitments. There will be no lasting success apart from a lasting transformation. Such transformation as God in Christ supplies is a process that begins with a gracious acceptance of the claims of the gospel and continues unto and beyond death. The prophet addresses God's people, and his message is profoundly theological. "Trying harder" in secular terms is a Band-Aid on a mortal wound.

Human beings ultimately learn that true commitment comes from who God is and the ways in which God has revealed himself through his Word and interpreted deed. We face the true depths of human failure, self-

deception, and depravity only in light of the gospel, where the light of forgiveness and acceptance most clearly illumines the failures. Jeremiah's announcement of judgment points to a redemption that only God can provide. We learn too that what God demands by way of fidelity has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ and that the nature of human commitment to God depends on the gifts of the Holy Spirit and new life in Christ. God, the Judge of all the earth, is also the ultimate Promise Keeper. The church and individual Christians, therefore, are called to keep promises made to God and to exercise godly responsibility in their respective spheres of influence.

Jeremiah 11:18–12:17

BECAUSE THE LORD revealed their plot to me, I knew it, for at that time he showed me what they were doing. ¹⁹I had been like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter; I did not realize that they had plotted against me, saying,

"Let us destroy the tree and its fruit;
let us cut him off from the land of the
living,
that his name be remembered no
more."

20But, O LORD Almighty, you who judge
righteously
and test the heart and mind,
let me see your vengeance upon them,
for to you I have committed my cause.

²¹"Therefore this is what the LORD says about the men of Anathoth who are seeking your life and saying, 'Do not prophesy in the name of the LORD or you will die by our hands'—²²therefore this is what the LORD Almighty says: 'I will punish them. Their young men will die by the sword, their sons and daughters by famine. ²³Not even a remnant will be left to them, because I will bring disaster on the men of Anathoth in the year of their punishment.'"

12:1You are always righteous, O LORD, when I bring a case before you.

Yet I would speak with you about your justice:

Why does the way of the wicked prosper?

Why do all the faithless live at ease?

²You have planted them, and they have taken root; they grow and bear fruit.

You are always on their lips but far from their hearts.

³Yet you know me, O LORD; you see me and test my thoughts about you.

Drag them off like sheep to be butchered! Set them apart for the day of slaughter!

⁴How long will the land lie parched and the grass in every field be withered?

Because those who live in it are wicked, the animals and birds have perished.

Moreover, the people are saying, "He will not see what happens to us."

5"If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses?

If you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan?

⁶Your brothers, your own family even they have betrayed you; they have raised a loud cry against you.

Do not trust them, though they speak well of you.

7"I will forsake my house, abandon my inheritance;
I will give the one I love into the hands of her enemies.
8My inheritance has become to me like a lion in the forest.

She roars at me; therefore I hate her.

⁹Has not my inheritance become to me like a speckled bird of prey that other birds of prey surround and attack?

Go and gather all the wild beasts; bring them to devour.

¹⁰Many shepherds will ruin my vineyard and trample down my field;

they will turn my pleasant field into a desolate wasteland.

¹¹It will be made a wasteland, parched and desolate before me;

the whole land will be laid waste because there is no one who cares.

¹²Over all the barren heights in the desert destroyers will swarm,

for the sword of the LORD will devour from one end of the land to the other; no one will be safe.

¹³They will sow wheat but reap thorns; they will wear themselves out but gain nothing.

So bear the shame of your harvest because of the LORD's fierce anger."

¹⁴This is what the LORD says: "As for all my wicked neighbors who seize the inheritance I gave my people Israel, I will uproot them from their lands and I will uproot the house of Judah from among them. ¹⁵But after I uproot them, I will again have compassion and will bring each of them back to his own inheritance and his own country. ¹⁶And if they learn well the ways of my people and swear by my name, saying, 'As surely as the LORD lives'—even as they once taught my people to swear by Baal—

then they will be established among my people. ¹⁷But if any nation does not listen, I will completely uproot and destroy it," declares the LORD.

Original Meaning

THIS SECTION IS COMPRISED of prayer, lamentation/ complaint, sad reflection on Judah's sinful state (from both the prophet and God), and prophecies on the fate of wicked neighbors (both of Jeremiah and of Judah). It is not a unified address, but as is typical with other poetic subsections of the book, various units of speech are joined editorially because of common themes: here, lamentation and petition, persecution, and punishment. The material is undated and likely derives from various times in the prophet's ministry. The depiction of Judah's devastation in 12:7–13 probably reflects either the first (598–597) or second Babylonian assault (587–586) on Jerusalem.

In this section readers encounter the first of the prophet's prayerful reactions to persecution. Prayers related to his persecution, including his anger and despair, come at intervals in chapters 11–20. One often hears them described as Jeremiah's or complaints (11:18–23; 12:1–6; 15:10–14, 15–21; 17:14–18; 18:18–23; 20:7–13, 14–18). Also, through these prophetic words the sad reflection of the Lord emerges in a lament over the loss of the "one I love" (12:7–8). On occasion it is difficult to discern who is represented as lamenting, Jeremiah or the Lord. Both of them react emotionally to the folly and the failures of the people.

Jeremiah's lamentations follow the model of individual laments in the Psalter. The prophet is thereby marked as an individual who prays the prayers of Israel and as one who may confess sin, vent frustration, affirm his innocence in the face of persecution, and offer pleas for deliverance. In the account of Jeremiah's call (ch. 1), the prophet was told that persecution and opposition would come to him. His only protection was God's promise to watch over him and the word he would deliver. The fact that God called Jeremiah to a prophetic task did not mean that he was exempt from the doubts and depressions that strike those in position of high stress.

11:18–23. In a moment of consternation Jeremiah is shown the true intentions of neighbors from his hometown of Anathoth (a short distance north of Jerusalem). God reveals to him that they intend to humiliate him

and to bring his prophetic work to an end. Indeed, the phrase "cut him off from the land of the living" (v. 19) indicates murder, as does the threat of verse 21.

Jeremiah describes himself, therefore, as a lamb led to slaughter. Neither the context nor the terminology necessarily implies the sacrificial imagery of the temple cult. The language may simply reflect the profane practice of slaughter for consumption. It does, however, strongly imply that Jeremiah is innocent of any wrongdoing. A lamb led to slaughter carries with it the imagery of nonaggression and nonculpability on the part of the lamb. Jeremiah's predicament is not God's judgment on him but the plot of others (including some inhabitants of Anathoth, cf. 11:21–23; 12:6) who oppose his message and seek to harm him. They want him to stop prophesying as he has been in the name of the Lord.

The short prayer of the prophet in verse 20 is based on the conviction that God is a righteous Judge. Jeremiah asks not only for deliverance²—which is one task a judge can perform—but also for God to judge those who persecute him unjustly. God, who is able to assess the motives of heart, mind, and will, reveals that persecution of Jeremiah comes because he has sought to deliver God's word to Judah.

Verses 21–23 reveal a judgment on those who seek Jeremiah's life. Both verses 21 and 22 contain the formula "This is what the LORD says," giving a double emphasis to the judgment to come on the persecutors of the prophet.

12:1–6. Jeremiah again addresses the Lord in prayer, stating a premise about God's righteousness similar to that expressed in 11:20. The NIV translation of 12:1 may be rendered differently, "(Because) you are righteous, O LORD, I would plead a case³ with you." The case or issue that Jeremiah brings is not just that of threat to his life (although this is a primary element); it is also the question of why a righteous God allows the way of the wicked to prosper. If God is so clearly opposed to the activity of the wicked, then why not judge them and be done with it? Jeremiah prays for the destruction of the wicked because of the harm they have brought to the land and asks that they (instead of he) be taken off like sheep for the slaughter. Readers can see why this passage follows that of the description of Jeremiah's persecution in 11:18–23.

God's reply (12:5–6) does not deal with the larger question of evil's prosperity or even the more restricted question of immediate judgment on those who oppose Jeremiah and ruin the land. Instead, God speaks to Jeremiah as the one called to be a prophet to the nations. This reply is couched in terms of the conflict at hand in Judah and the heavy task of prophetic work that remains. Jeremiah may be weary already by the strain of prophetic duty, but there is yet more difficulty ahead. There is no way around either persecution or the wearying strain of prophetic work, yet there will be a way through it. Jeremiah is not to trust even his relatives; rather, he is to look to the Lord for his strength and to the vindication the Lord will reveal in the future.

Jeremiah offers a quotation of the people in 12:4 to the effect that they doubt that God sees what is happening to them since he fails to act. They too (according to Jeremiah's prayer of frustration) see a God of inactivity. God does not "take the bait" and offer a defense of his providence. He simply calls the prophet to keep on the task at hand.

12:7–13. God sets forth his own complaint and announcement of judgment over the loss of his people. Here is evidence that the Lord is pained by the folly of his house. The previously revealed reply to Jeremiah in 12:5–6 does not reflect God's indifference to the prophet's precarious circumstances but recognizes the advanced state of decay in Judah and Jerusalem, the consequences of which neither Jeremiah nor God can avoid.

Verse 7 describes Judah as God's house, as his inheritance, and as the one whom God loves. All of this is family imagery and metaphor. As the head of his household, God experiences pain at its ruination and at the perversion of his inheritance. Verse 8 describes the city as transformed into an animal against God, and God's comment is that he "hates" her. Behind the reference to "her" is the metaphor of "daughter Jerusalem," a precious member of God's household. This is the language of a betrayed father and husband grappling with the enormity of treachery in the family. In this case the hatred is not the opposite of love, which is indifference, but the sad effects of betrayed and wounded love.

12:14–17. This word about the neighboring states around Judah anticipates elements in the oracles concerning foreign nations in chapters 25, 46–51. It sits somewhat surprisingly in this context, but it offers important perspective on the function of judgmental prophecies. The

announcement of judgment may be in service to a larger design for blessing and reconciliation.

According to 2 Kings 24:2, bands of Arameans, Ammonites, and Moabites were marauders against Judah and Jerusalem. Psalm 137:7 quotes Edomite voices who urged the destruction of Jerusalem. The Edomites are the object of bitter feelings in Lamentations 4:21–22 and in the prophecy of Obadiah (cf. Mal. 1:2–5). The neighbors who are against Judah and who taught God's people to swear by Baal will be judged and exiled ("uprooted") along with Judah, but they may yet have a future if they should learn the ways of the Lord. This is in line with the restoration prophecy of Amos 9:11–12, that the remnants of Edom may be incorporated in the booth of David that God will rebuild.

Bridging Contexts

THE LANGUAGE OF LAMENT/COMPLAINT. Jeremiah's anxiety about life and his distress over his persecution are expressed in the language of lamentation or complaint. Put differently, his prayers are similar to the individual complaints in the Psalter, from which he has drawn his vocabulary and spiritual sustenance. This is a clue to their appropriation for today.

In recent decades scholars have debated the extent to which the prayers in Jer. 11:20 and 12:1–4 (and others) reflect the personal experiences of Jeremiah. Older commentators, especially nineteenth-and twentieth-century liberals, found in these prayers the key to the inner life and religious experience of the prophet. With the advent of form-critical analysis (genre identification), it became clear that Jeremiah's prayers are "typical" in that they represent the faith posture and the language of the Psalms. In reaction to the almost romantic reading of liberal individualism, some scholars have argued that the prophet's own experience is almost completely submerged behind the standard form of typical prayers.

However one assesses this issue, Jeremiah clearly prays to God as Israelites before him had done in times of crisis and self-doubt. More particularly, not only has Jeremiah been instructed by the classical prayers of his ancestors; his own adoption of them become instruction for his readers and hearers. Perhaps this issue is more crucial for modern

appropriation than a rehash of the debate over his personal experience. Jeremiah chooses a vehicle that expresses his personal experience, and that vehicle gives shape to his words. The prophet's prayers, his personal experience, his public acts, and so on are all vehicles for proclamation and instruction rather a simple reporting of his feelings.

When we affirm that Jeremiah's own particular experience is mediated through the text, we also affirm that it paradigmatic; it is the result of his being called to the prophetic office (see comments below). Jeremiah finds "his voice" among the prayers of David and other ancestors in the faith, and we are told as much about the trials of the office as of the inner life of the person.

Since these prayers do not preserve a specific public setting in the book, later readers do not know how (or even if) these words were given to Jeremiah's contemporaries in Judah. While this remains a mystery, they are obviously meant to be instructive to readers of the book since they are preserved in the book. This is their primary function, although it is certainly plausible that Jeremiah looked for ways to make his prayers a teaching device for his contemporaries.

The individual and corporate laments/complaints of the Psalter, the largest single "type" (genre) in that book, reflect the personal crises of people of faith, including even the king. They can be model prayers for the faithful, but this is not required for them to be instructive for either ancient or modern readers. They provide a vocabulary through which to articulate trial and anguish, and they point to God as sympathetic Shepherd and righteous Judge.

The majority of the psalms deal with the power of the forces arrayed against God's servant(s), the plea to the Lord for vindication and deliverance through his judging the wicked, and confidence in God's power to redeem the circumstances of those who pray. Less often they are concerned with the effects of personal transgression (e.g., Ps. 51). Jeremiah prays to God, who knows the heart and mind and who judges righteously; in boldness he reminds God of his (God's) righteousness while at the same time bringing before him observations concerning the ascendancy of evil. In all this Jeremiah prays like the saints of previous generations, including David himself, who clung to the God of righteousness in spite of outward circumstances.

The prophetic office and persecution. A second contextual reading of the prayers sees them as reflective of a dual setting: the prophetic office to which Jeremiah was called and an illustration of the persecution announced at his call as sure to come against his prophetic activity. These two elements are related. In Jeremiah 1, a variety of opponents was noted who would stand against Jeremiah and his prophetic message (1:8, 17–19). His persecution, while real and personal, came to him as a result of his prophetic work.

Jeremiah is not the only servant of God to be opposed and persecuted, for he stands in a line of suffering prophetic figures reaching back to Moses and continuing past Jeremiah to Jesus. He was granted what Jesus calls a prophet's reward (Matt. 5:11–12). Jeremiah is also one of the great cloud of scriptural witnesses, one from the line of faithful servants who endured hostility for the sake of God's call (Heb. 11). Thus, Jeremiah's persecution is linked precisely to his call as a prophet, and its intensity of degree is pronounced because of the office. One bridge from Jeremiah's world to ours runs through the exercise of prophetic ministry and its consequences.

Christological reading. A Christological reading of this section begins with this recognition that Jeremiah's opposition is linked to his role as God's prophet. On the one hand, opposition to Jeremiah was ultimately opposition to God, who sent him. Thus Jeremiah's anguish is humanly indicative of God's own anguish over rejection. This point comes out in God's own complaint over the failure of his house in Jer. 12:7–13. On the other hand, the prophetic suffering of Jeremiah was a step along the way of God's dealings with Israel that in the fullness of time would bring forth God's Son, Jesus, his suffering representative and the Messiah of Israel. Jeremiah's suffering is not redemptive as is that of Jesus, but it is representative of the prophetic office and thereby "prophetic" for the suffering of Christ.

Jesus brought the prophetic office to culmination in his call to repentance and in his suffering on behalf of righteousness. In a mysterious way Jesus learned obedience from the things he suffered (Heb. 2:10; 5:8); his persecution became the way of salvation for those for whom he died. In his innocence Jesus had every right to call for judgment on those who persecuted him (as Jeremiah did), but his dependence on God's righteousness meant that he left judgment to him (1 Peter 2:20–25).

The lamb led to slaughter is Jeremiah's self-designation. John describes Jesus as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Scripture is rich with imagery of the lamb or sheep for slaughter (e.g., Gen. 22; Ex. 12–13), and Jeremiah's innocent prophetic suffering is one element of the biblical tapestry related to suffering and redemption. In his self-offering, Christ's redemptive work includes forgiveness of the evildoers—a miracle of grace that moves beyond Jeremiah's own words but not beyond the reach of the God who inspires the prophet.

Israel's neighbors. The word about the neighbors (Jer. 12:14–17) is related both to God's concern for the nations' salvation and God's intention to judge them with righteousness. These matters are of broad interest to the biblical writers, with the New Testament emphasizing as of first importance the concern that the gospel be preached to all the nations. Jeremiah's word relates first of all to temporal judgment, but it holds out the possibility that the neighbors will be restored in their homeland and related to the Lord. It remains for the New Testament to spell out in more detail just what a glorious inheritance the nations may have in God's Son.

Contemporary Significance

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP. Jeremiah's words about his persecution come from the discharge of his prophetic office. They also raise for Christians the issue of the cost of discipleship, what might be termed the relationship between Christian vocation and suffering when disciples take up their cross and follow Christ. Family and friends alike apparently opposed Jeremiah's prophetic activity. His opposition, his despair, and even the threats to his life came not from his sinfulness but from the exercise of his faith in responding to God's call. This is a perennial issue for Christians, more likely in some cultures and settings than in others, but a perennial issue nevertheless.

In the Bridging Contexts section we have already noted the fellowship of suffering that the prophet represents and in which he has a well-deserved place. To name just three current examples, Christians in Indonesia, in the Philippines, and in Sudan have been attacked simply because they believe in Christ. The treatment of some of them is horribly close to that of a lamb led to slaughter. To be fair, one should cite also the despicable treatment of

Jews in the country of Iran, where many were put on trial in the summer months of 2000 and charged with being agents for the state of Israel. There is no evidence, of course, to support these charges. Their only crime seems to be that they held to their faith in the God of Israel in spite of overwhelming pressure to do otherwise.

God's righteousness. We should take note of Jeremiah's words to the Lord about God's righteousness. That righteousness is the presupposition to all that is uttered in this section, even the questioning of God's judging that comes in 12:1–2. It is the anchor to which the prophet clings in spite of his circumstances. Jeremiah will not be able to depend on his own righteousness; this is clear even though these prayers presume that Jeremiah is innocent of any wrongdoing with respect to the charges of his opponents.

Jeremiah will not be able to depend on his own patience or resourcefulness. He knows full well that his life means little except that God has made certain promises to him, and it is only because of his belief in God's righteousness (God's integrity) that he has any hope. Because of what Jeremiah believes about God's integrity, he can pray both bluntly and expectantly about the exercise of God's righteousness. In faith he can even note its seeming absence.

Jeremiah also prays for God's vindication because of what he believes about God's righteousness. Vindication for Jeremiah means deliverance from the plots of his opponents and God's judgment on them. Christians should listen carefully for what Jeremiah actually prays. He seeks the exercise of God's righteousness, not the fulfillment of his wish list for vengeance. Jeremiah has no vendetta against his opponents, and he does not seek to judge them himself; he simply holds up their activities in persecuting God's prophet before the judgment seat of God. For God to be faithful to his promise to Jeremiah as prophet to the nations, those who persecute him will fail at their task to silence him. For them to persist in persecution is to invite the very judgment of God on themselves that they have mistakenly sought to perpetrate on Jeremiah. This does not make Jeremiah invulnerable; he remains a man whose only security resides in his trust of God's righteousness.

When Christians pray for their enemies and those who persecute them, they pray that God will grant the persecutors the ability to recognize their errors and see the way to a forgiveness that is ultimately God's to give.

Their deeds deserve his judgment, yet by his grace that judgment has been borne by someone else. If God's grace is spurned, then nothing else in all of creation can save them. The prayer "Your kingdom come" includes the assumption that judgment as well as mercy are part of the exercise of God's righteousness. Because Christ met suffering in a way that Jeremiah could not, there is the marvelous possibility that his enemies will meet with a transforming judgment and restoration that Jeremiah could not completely foresee.

Does this make Jeremiah's prayer for vindication and judgment wrong for Christians to use? No. But what they should pray for is the vindication of the gospel and the frustration of plans for its subversion. This is consistent with Jeremiah's own plea for the exercise of God's righteousness and the vindication of the message he has been given by God.

The ultimate answer. God's "answer" to Jeremiah in 12:5–6 is not an explanation of why evil may have its ascendant day any more than the book of Job provides an answer to evil and suffering. God's reply does not even tell Jeremiah how God will vindicate him. It is less an answer and more a somber indication that to run the race of prophetic office before him, Jeremiah will be stretched more than he can yet imagine. So he must be prepared! This is also a word about the life of discipleship, about the process of refinement and growth in grace, and about trust in God in spite of difficult circumstances. It is not a philosophical discussion about the justification of God's ways and timing to the prophet.

Christian faith is well instructed by this surprising word from Jeremiah. At most points along the journey of faith, we cannot see the twists and turns that will make up our witness. And why should we know more than that our life is hid in Christ and that our ultimate vindication rests with him? Our relationship with God is not a panacea for life's problems but the basis on which we face those problems. Our strength is not our own. Should we seek to run the race with our own resources, we will ultimately fail. Should we run the race in dependence on God, we are not guaranteed victory according to worldly standards either, only that we belong to God.

In considering this surprising word in Jer. 12:5–6, therefore, one is forcefully reminded that God has not abandoned Jeremiah. His timing and purpose are simply not revealed completely to the prophet, who is told that he must be prepared for more difficult days ahead. This is not so different

from the words that the apostle Paul spoke to the Philippians about pressing on toward the goal of God's call in Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:12–14). It is an arduous journey with twists and turns throughout, but the pioneer of salvation, Jesus Christ himself (Heb. 12:2), has pointed us to the journey's end and offers his companionship along the way.

Jeremiah 13:1–27

This is what the LORD said to me: "Go and buy a linen belt and put it around your waist, but do not let it touch water." ²So I bought a belt, as the LORD directed, and put it around my waist.

³Then the word of the LORD came to me a second time: ⁴"Take the belt you bought and are wearing around your waist, and go now to Perath and hide it there in a crevice in the rocks." ⁵So I went and hid it at Perath, as the LORD told me.

⁶Many days later the LORD said to me, "Go now to Perath and get the belt I told you to hide there."

⁷So I went to Perath and dug up the belt and took it from the place where I had hidden it, but now it was ruined and completely useless.

⁸Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁹"This is what the LORD says: 'In the same way I will ruin the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem. ¹⁰These wicked people, who refuse to listen to my words, who follow the stubbornness of their hearts and go after other gods to serve and worship them, will be like this belt—completely useless! ¹¹For as a belt is bound around a man's waist, so I bound the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah to me,' declares the LORD, 'to be my people for my renown and praise and honor. But they have not listened.'

¹²"Say to them: 'This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: Every wineskin should be filled with wine.' And if they say to you, 'Don't we know that every wineskin should be filled with wine?' ¹³then tell them, 'This is what the LORD says: I am going to fill with drunkenness all who live in this land, including the kings who sit on David's throne, the

priests, the prophets and all those living in Jerusalem. ¹⁴I will smash them one against the other, fathers and sons alike, declares the LORD. I will allow no pity or mercy or compassion to keep me from destroying them."

¹⁵Hear and pay attention, do not be arrogant, for the LORD has spoken. ¹⁶Give glory to the LORD your God before he brings the darkness, before your feet stumble on the darkening hills. You hope for light, but he will turn it to thick darkness and change it to deep gloom. ¹⁷But if you do not listen, I will weep in secret because of your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly, overflowing with tears, because the LORD's flock will be taken captive.

¹⁸Say to the king and to the queen mother, "Come down from your thrones, for your glorious crowns will fall from your heads."
¹⁹The cities in the Negev will be shut up, and there will be no one to open them.
All Judah will be carried into exile, carried completely away.
²⁰Lift up your eyes and see those who are coming from the north.
Where is the flock that was entrusted to you, the sheep of which you boasted?

What will you say when the LORD sets over you those you cultivated as your special allies?
Will not pain grip you like that of a woman in labor?
And if you ask yourself, "Why has this happened to me?"—it is because of your many sins that your skirts have been torn off and your body mistreated.
Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots?
Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil.

²⁴"I will scatter you like chaff driven by the desert wind.
 ²⁵This is your lot, the portion I have decreed for you," declares the LORD,

"because you have forgotten me and trusted in false gods.

26 I will pull up your skirts over your face that your shame may be seen—

27 your adulteries and lustful neighings, your shameless prostitution!

I have seen your detestable acts on the hills and in the fields.

Woe to you, O Jerusalem!

How long will you be unclean?"

Original Meaning

This chapter contains a collection of judgment prophecies, each intended to expose the failure of Judah and Jerusalem before the Lord and to indicate

the historical form of judgment to come as a consequence of that failure. As with most of the first half of the book, the text provides no dates in Jeremiah's ministry for either the symbolic act in 13:1–11 or the oracles that follow. Judgment appears to be looming on the historical horizon (one of the assaults by Nebuchadnezzar on Judah?). In 13:18–19 some form of destruction and depopulation is assumed.

13:1–11. This prophecy, a prose account with an autobiographical element, takes the form of a symbolic act accompanied by commentary from the Lord. The prophets often carried out symbolic acts as illustrations or reinforcements of their proclamation. This is the first of several acts Jeremiah performs to portray his message.

God commands Jeremiah to take a linen waistcloth, clothe himself with it, then remove it and take it to the bank of the Perath and leave it. Scholars have debated whether the river or stream named Perath is the well-known Euphrates (ca. 300 miles from Jerusalem) or the seasonal stream near Anathoth with a similar name (cf. Josh. 18:23). In Hebrew *perat* can refer to either entity. The difficulty with concluding that Perath is the Euphrates comes when we recognize that considerable time and expense would be required for two round trips to the banks of the Euphrates River. What purpose does such a long trip have, either for the prophet who would make the trek or for the hearers/readers? If there is significance attached to the river in this symbolic act, it is implicit and not explicit in the text. The textual emphasis falls on the linen waistcloth, not on the river.

In response to these considerations, however, note that convenience of access is not a primary consideration when considering prophetic motivation. It was not convenient for Hosea to marry a prostitute or for Ezekiel to lie on his side for weeks. If the closer-but-lesser-known stream near Anathoth is the location of the discarded waistcloth, then it is almost certainly chosen because its name reminds Jeremiah (and the audience) of the Euphrates and the mighty powers coming from the north (cf. Jer. 13:20), powers long associated with Assyria and Babylon. One can make a case in context that the allies courted by Jerusalem and mentioned in 13:21 are the Assyrians and Babylonians from across the great River Euphrates.

Just as the waistcloth was to be bound to its wearer, so Israel and Judah have been formed by God to be bound to him. The verb "be bound" (*dabaq*) in verse 11 is the same word used in Genesis 2:24 to describe the man who

leaves his parents to "be united" (in Elizabethan English, "cleave") to his wife and to become "one flesh." Israel was enjoined to be united to the Lord (Deut. 10:20; 11:22; 13:4; 30:20). The soiling of the waistcloth came because Jeremiah removed it and buried it near the bank of the water. So Israel and Judah—whose separation from the Lord was caused by their faithlessness—were like the ruined waistcloth.

The conclusion in verse 11 uses the daring metaphor of bound clothing as a way of emphasizing the fall from grace of Israel and Judah. Their sad description is emphatic and corporate—the "whole house" of Israel and that of Judah have fallen away. They are ruined as surely as the waistcloth was fouled from its exposure to the elements on the riverbank. Israel and Judah were formed for God's "renown and praise and honor," but they are no better than dirty underwear.

13:12–14. The prophecy about wineskins contains a command to Jeremiah to repeat a proverbial saying: "Every wineskin should be filled with wine." Of course, this is the expectation for wineskins—they are created to hold wine. The punch line, however, is that God will fill the land's inhabitants with drunkenness so that they will crash against one another. In this scenario the intended function of the wineskins is ruined in similar fashion to the waistcloth. Neither waistcloth nor wine jars fulfill their intended functions and thus are failures.

13:15–19. Jeremiah utters judgments against the pride that leads to a fall. Verse 16 employs the unusual command to "give glory to the LORD your God" before the darkness of judgment falls on the people. Perhaps this command functions like that given to Achan in Joshua 7:19. There Achan is brought forward for execution, but before the sentence is carried out, he is asked to "give glory to the LORD." That command to Achan seems to play two roles: (1) a call to tell or admit the truth in public, and (2) an acknowledgment that God's ways and judgments are just. If these two roles lie behind the command to the people in Jer. 13:16, then it is not meant as a way to spare the people from the coming judgment; rather, it is a call for them to admit the justice of the judgment about to befall them.

It is possible, however, that the call to "give glory to the LORD" is a way to avert the disaster to come. If so, then Jeremiah's message functions as a call for repentance and change on the part of the people. Jeremiah reports that he will weep over the folly of the people whose pride is such that they are heedless of their dire circumstances.

Verses 18–19 point to a particular source of pride, the king and queen mother. Their crowns will fall from their heads as a sign of the fall of the people. These two royal figures are not specifically named. Jeremiah contains a section elsewhere (chs. 21–22) in which Judean royalty is the object of his judgmental oracles. In that section the monarchs are named. This short section is the only one in Jeremiah in which the role of the queen mother is taken up.

13:20–27. Jerusalem is called to see the foe from the north who comes in judgment. Should she wonder why destruction has come to her, Jeremiah quotes a proverbial saying (v. 23). Just as neither Ethiopians (Africans) nor leopards can change the distinctive color of their skin, so the evil propensity of God's people cannot be removed by their own hand. The evil of Jerusalem is also personified as a prostitute, whose private parts are shamefully exposed.

The concluding question, "How long will you be unclean?" (v. 27), assumes that even though Jerusalem is incapable of righting herself, she could at least recognize her plight and seek the Lord, who alone can heal her failures. The imagery of this section is similar to that of the prophecies against Jerusalem in chapters 2–3.

Bridging Contexts

AUDIENCE. THERE ARE two audiences who initially heard these judgment prophecies: (1) those who heard the oral proclamation of Jeremiah, and (2) the exilic audience to whom the *written* prophecies were directed. We have no clue as to how the symbolic act/ interpretation of Jer. 13:1–11 may have been communicated in oral form to Jeremiah's contemporaries. Did he, for example, wear the fouled waistcloth as a sign to the people, offering oral commentary when opportunity presented itself? This is possible and consistent with the enactment of other such messages. Isaiah, for example, gave his son a symbolic name, and when he sought an audience with King Ahaz, he took his son with him (Isa. 7:1–17). The account only makes sense if the name of the child (Shear-Jashub, "a remnant will return") was meant

to communicate to King Ahaz. If Jeremiah wore the fouled clothing, we are not told so directly.

This silence suggests that we should begin an interpretation based on the perspective of the reading audience, who hear the account as a way to confirm God's judgment to come *and* as indications of behavior to avoid. All the prophecies in Jeremiah 13 are part of a chorus line of scriptural texts (Old and New Testament) indicating the righteous judgments of the Lord. As such these prophecies invite readers to examine themselves and their communities in light of God's call to holiness and obedience.

Enacted illustrations. For the sequential reader of the book, the enacted parable of the waistcloth is Jeremiah's first example of a symbolic act. He is one of several biblical persons whose acts illustrate concretely their message and even embody the gist of their oral communication. Jeremiah later wears a yoke (chs. 27–28) and purchases property (ch. 32) as symbolic acts; the first indicated judgment to come in the historical process, and the second foreshadowed restoration from exile.

Likewise, Isaiah and Hosea enacted parables. Both named children as embodiments of their message. Ezekiel lay on his side and burned his shorn hair to act out the siege and destruction of Jerusalem (Ezek. 4–5). In the New Testament the priest Zechariah was struck dumb to embody his impertinence before the angelic messenger (Luke 1:5–25). His son John urged the embodiment of a new relationship with God based on repentance by baptizing people in the Jordan River. Jesus' miracles were the embodiment of God's kingdom made manifest; his works of power were signs of his divine Sonship.

From a slightly different angle, Jeremiah's symbolic act illustrates the connection between word and deed. On numerous occasions Jeremiah announced God's judgment. His personal engagement with his message was such that it led him to lamentations and tears. In the symbolic act not only did his soul internalize the message, but his very actions were a physical demonstration to his audience (for those with ears to hear and eyes to see) of his prophecy. There is even a sense in which God's word is incarnate in Jeremiah's actions, so close is the connection between human activity and the portrayal of the divine message.

Clothing metaphors. The waistcloth of Jer. 13:1–11 is also part of the larger scriptural appropriation of clothing metaphors to depict the life of

God's people. Since clothing was (and often remains) a recognized symbol of identity, the Bible occasionally uses it as a means of instruction. To illustrate his care for the first couple after their act of rebellion, God made them clothing of animal skin (Gen. 3:21). The rich symbolism of the priestly office is seen in the description of Aaron's vestments (Ex. 28). A believer, confident in God's grace, can exult in the "clothing" of salvation and righteousness (Isa. 61:10).

In the New Testament, Jesus declared that worry over clothing can divert attention from God's good gifts, noting that not even the finery of Solomon compares to the lilies of the field as clothed by God. Paul indicated that those baptized into Christ have clothed themselves with the risen Lord (Gal. 3:27). The righteousness of God's saints is symbolized as clean linen garments (Rev. 19:8). Indeed, John sees the risen Christ in finery like that of royalty and the priesthood, including a golden girdle or outer waistband (Rev. 1:13; 3:5; 7:9).

Modern cultures are capable of understanding the symbolism of clothing and acting as a medium of communication (plays, television, movies). The symbolic acts in Jeremiah are similar to a play, a pantomime, or street theater. Indeed, the increasing popularity of skits as part of a contemporary worship experience suggests the ability of role-playing to communicate effectively. A careful reader cannot help but notice how much Jeremiah carries his oral communication with elements of role-play and acting. How else can the change in voices be portrayed? In the modern age, this illustrative activity makes sense. The issue of God's judgment on the disobedience of his people, however, is the more difficult matter for modern Christians (below).

Giving God glory. Among the words of judgment in Jeremiah 13 is the imperative to give God glory (13:16) rather than continue in a self-deceiving pride. As noted above, perhaps this specific word is linked to the wider scriptural injunction to acknowledge the rightness (the justice) of God's judgment. Joshua urged Achan, the soldier who had violated the ban on trophies of battle, "to give glory to the LORD" and to confess what he had done (Josh. 7:19). His confession was an integral part of giving glory to God; in acknowledging his wrong Achan also affirmed the justness of God's standards. In Acts 5 Peter accuses Ananias and Sapphira of lying before God. True, the injunction "to give God the glory" is not quoted there,

but the public character of their interrogation was designed to underscore their guilt and the justness of the Lord's standards.

Contemporary Significance

As OFTEN WITH PROPHETIC JUDGMENTS, contemporary readers may seek instruction either in the announced judgment itself or in the judgment's mirror image—those hoped-for characteristics of faithfulness and obedience. God's announced judgment on the faithlessness of Judah for idolatry (Jer. 13:10) is a familiar refrain in this book, and any generation of God's people must examine themselves for evidence that they have lost their first love, squandered their inheritance, or spurned the Lord. The same examination is relevant for individuals as well, even though Jeremiah's own critique is corporately based.

The unusual illustration of the waistcloth brings to consideration the claim in 13:11 that God made all of Israel and Judah to be bound to him. The qualification "whole house" is intended to describe all the people in their God-intended unity. Here one meets the mirror image of judgment. God's purpose for Israel and Judah was to be united to him as Lord, "my people for my renown and praise and honor." God's people in the Old Testament may be used as negative examples (i.e., as examples of what not to do), but their fundamental identity resides in their election by God as his people. These two things make them the spiritual ancestors of Christians today. The very oddity of comparison with a bound waistcloth helps drive one to see this glorious identity amidst the failures of that generation.

Finally, perhaps modern Christians should give more consideration to the impact of symbolic acts as part of their discipleship. The president of a North American seminary remarked recently that he had not realized the extent to which his various acts were evaluated for what they might represent with respect to his policies and commitments. After some consideration he concluded that there is justification in seeing a connection between his acts and his commitments. It made him reconsider the way in which his institution took public action, for communication is not just words but deeds.

Is not this true on both an individual and a corporate scale? A church that refuses to move from a changing neighborhood is making a statement as

surely as is the church that moves. A Christian who volunteers in the nursery program "speaks" as surely as the teacher of a class. The church that refuses to play the insidious games of nationalism or racism speaks, no matter what it prints on paper.

Jeremiah 14:1–15:9

This is the word of the LORD to Jeremiah concerning the drought:

²"Judah mourns, her cities languish; they wail for the land, and a cry goes up from Jerusalem. ³The nobles send their servants for water; they go to the cisterns but find no water. They return with their jars unfilled; dismayed and despairing, they cover their heads. ⁴The ground is cracked because there is no rain in the land; the farmers are dismayed and cover their heads. ⁵Even the doe in the field deserts her newborn fawn because there is no grass. ⁶Wild donkeys stand on the barren heights and pant like jackals; their eyesight fails for lack of pasture."

⁷Although our sins testify against us,
O LORD, do something for the sake of
your name.
For our backsliding is great;
we have sinned against you.
⁸O Hope of Israel,
its Savior in times of distress,
why are you like a stranger in the land,
like a traveler who stays only a night?

⁹Why are you like a man taken by surprise, like a warrior powerless to save?
You are among us, O LORD, and we bear your name; do not forsake us!

¹⁰This is what the LORD says about this people:

"They greatly love to wander; they do not restrain their feet. So the LORD does not accept them; he will now remember their wickedness and punish them for their sins."

¹¹Then the LORD said to me, "Do not pray for the well-being of this people. ¹²Although they fast, I will not listen to their cry; though they offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Instead, I will destroy them with the sword, famine and plague."

¹³But I said, "Ah, Sovereign LORD, the prophets keep telling them, 'You will not see the sword or suffer famine. Indeed, I will give you lasting peace in this place."

14Then the LORD said to me, "The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I have not sent them or appointed them or spoken to them. They are prophesying to you false visions, divinations, idolatries and the delusions of their own minds.

15Therefore, this is what the LORD says about the prophets who are prophesying in my name: I did not send them, yet they are saying, 'No sword or famine will touch this land.' Those same prophets will perish by sword and famine. 16And the people they are prophesying to will be thrown out into the streets of Jerusalem because of the famine and sword.

There will be no one to bury them or their wives, their sons or their daughters. I will pour out on them the calamity they deserve.

14:17"Speak this word to them:

"'Let my eyes overflow with tears night and day without ceasing; for my virgin daughter—my people—has suffered a grievous wound, a crushing blow.

18 If I go into the country, I see those slain by the sword; if I go into the city, I see the ravages of famine.

Both prophet and priest have gone to a land they know not.""

¹⁹Have you rejected Judah completely? Do you despise Zion? Why have you afflicted us so that we cannot be healed? We hoped for peace but no good has come, for a time of healing but there is only terror. ²⁰O LORD, we acknowledge our wickedness and the guilt of our fathers; we have indeed sinned against you. ²¹For the sake of your name do not despise us: do not dishonor your glorious throne. Remember your covenant with us and do not break it. ²²Do any of the worthless idols of the nations bring rain?

Do the skies themselves send down showers?
No, it is you, O LORD our God.
Therefore our hope is in you, for you are the one who does all this.

^{15:1}Then the LORD said to me: "Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me, my heart would not go out to this people. Send them away from my presence! Let them go!

²And if they ask you, 'Where shall we go?' tell them, 'This is what the LORD says:

"Those destined for death, to death; those for the sword, to the sword; those for starvation, to starvation; those for captivity, to captivity.'

³"I will send four kinds of destroyers against them," declares the LORD, "the sword to kill and the dogs to drag away and the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth to devour and destroy. ⁴I will make them abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth because of what Manasseh son of Hezekiah king of Judah did in Jerusalem.

5"Who will have pity on you, O Jerusalem?
Who will mourn for you?
Who will stop to ask how you are?

6You have rejected me," declares the LORD.

"You keep on backsliding.
So I will lay hands on you and destroy you;
I can no longer show compassion.

7will winnow them with a winnowing fork at the city gates of the land.

I will bring bereavement and destruction on my people, for they have not changed their ways. ⁸I will make their widows more numerous than the sand of the sea. At midday I will bring a destroyer against the mothers of their young suddenly I will bring down on them anguish and terror. ⁹The mother of seven will grow faint and breathe her last. Her sun will set while it is still day; she will be disgraced and humiliated. I will put the survivors to the sword before their enemies." declares the LORD.

Original Meaning

CHAPTER 14 (and perhaps the two chapters that follow) is occasioned by the threatening circumstances of drought. As is typical in the first half of Jeremiah, we have no idea when the prophet utters these prophecies since no king is mentioned, though the reference to a fast in 14:12 may hint at the historical setting. The only other reference to fasting in Jeremiah is in 36:6, 9, which is set during the reign of Jehoiakim—more specifically, the ninth month of the fifth year of his reign (Nov./Dec., 604 B.C.). At this time Nebuchadnezzar's army was campaigning in the region. This threat may be in the background, though the primary concern of chapter 14 is that of drought. If the context is indeed November or December and the fall rains have not yet come, a fast would be appropriate. In the Mediterranean climate there is no rain during the summer months. But without rain at some point in the fall, drought conditions become severe.

The different speaking voices in 14:1–15:9 comprise a pattern of oracle from the prophet, followed by words from the people. The prophet, speaking for God, has the first and last word:

- A. 14:2–6: The prophet speaks of Judah's mourning.
- B. 14:7–9: The people as a whole confess sin and offer a petition.
- C. 14:10–16: The Lord speaks to Jeremiah about judgment on the people and other prophets.
- D. 14:17–18: At God's command, Jeremiah delivers a lament over the fate of the people.
- E. 14:19–22: The people as a whole confess sin and offer a petition again.
- F. 15:1–9: The Lord speaks to Jeremiah about judgment on the people.

It is difficult to know how one should read the two corporate confessions/petitions of the people (14:7–9, 19–22). Nothing appears wrong with the sentiments expressed in them, but after both comes language of divine judgment. These units include confession of sin (14:7, 20). We have at least two options in seeking to make sense of this section in the context of Jeremiah's ministry. (1) The corporate confessions/petitions of the people, which offer the appropriate words of confession and repentance, are actually insincere. This view accords with the aims of the book as a whole, since one of its primary functions is to explain the culpability of the people in facing defeat and exile. (2) These confessions/petitions are confessions that Jeremiah is offering to the people, if only they would take the confessional content to heart.

- 14:2–6. Judah and Jerusalem mourn over the devastating effects of a drought. Nothing in these verses links the drought with divine judgment; instead, they rehearse the pitiful circumstances of the people and animals in a common quest for water.
- 14:7–9. Only here do we see a link between the terrible circumstances of the people and their sinfulness before God. Jeremiah implores God to act because his name is great and because his people bear that name. The people confess that their "backsliding is great," seemingly a frank acknowledgment of sin against God. In confessional terms God is described as Israel's Hope (*miqweh*) and Savior (*mošia*) in troubled times (v. 8). Verse 9 reflects the tradition of God as a valiant warrior who defends and delivers his people (cf. Ex. 15:3).

Taken as a whole, this section has parallels with the Psalter and other biblical prayers. As noted above, either the people are guilty of rank insincerity in praying this way, or this prayer is Jeremiah's advice to them on how to pray appropriately in the context of a drought used in judgment against them.

14:10–16. This mostly prose section records the "give and take" between God and the prophet. Verse 10 contains a poetic oracle that God does not accept the people. He will remember their wickedness and punish them. Jeremiah 31:34 is essentially a reversal of this sentiment. When God forgives, he "forgets."

In verses 11 and 14 come autobiographical introductions: "Then the LORD said to me." As in other occasions, Jeremiah is bidden not to pray for the people (e.g., 7:16). Prophets who have led the people astray receive sustained attention. God denies having appointed them or sending them. They are obviously making Jeremiah's life more difficult by speaking in the Lord's name and contradicting his own prophecies of judgment.

- 14:17–18. These two verses offer an example of lament in which it is difficult to know who is speaking, Jeremiah or God. Jeremiah, of course, is commanded to speak these words to the people, but in doing so he represents God. "My virgin daughter—my people" (NIV) reflects more naturally on God as speaker than the prophet. The familiar metaphor of daughter applies to Jerusalem or the people as members of God's household.
- 14:19–22. The second corporate confession/petition of the people asks plaintively if God has completely rejected Judah and Zion. The sad comment, "We hoped for peace," is the prayer of all right-thinking people. With the confession of sin also comes the refrain, "for the sake of your name do not despise us" (cf. 14:7, 9), and a plea for God to remember his covenant with them and not to annul it.
- 15:1–9. As with the first corporate confession/petition in 14:7–9, this second one is also followed by an emphatic rejection of the people. If possible, this second rejection is even stronger than the one in 14:10–16. The text indicates the frightfulness of God's judgment in more than one way.

The reference to Moses and Samuel as mediators and intercessors (Jer. 15:1) evokes memory of past events in Israel's history. When God was

angry with Israel in the desert, Moses interposed himself between God and the sinful community (Ex. 32:30–35; 34:1–27); moreover, Moses was a prophet who knew God "face to face" (Ex. 33:11; Num. 12:8; Deut. 34:10), mediating God's laws to his people and guiding two generations of them toward the Promised Land.

In the period before monarchy, when the word of God was rare in the land (1 Sam. 3:1), God raised up Samuel to be prophet, priest, and judge to Israel. It was Samuel who reorganized Israel after the debacle of defeat by the Philistines at Aphek and the subsequent loss of the ark of the covenant (4–6). The people entreated Samuel to cry out to the Lord on their behalf, and eventually the Philistine threat was subdued (7:8–17). Even after the appointment of a king, the people entreated Samuel to pray for them to the Lord (12:19–25; cf. 12:7). In the work of Moses and Samuel, one finds models of intercessory prayers and accounts of the preservation of the people in spite of the divine judgment that had fallen on them.

For God to dismiss the work of Moses and Samuel as efficacious in the present moment of Judah's sin is, in effect, to say that no prophetic mediator will be accepted and that judgment cannot be averted. Judgment came on Israel during the prophetic ministries of these two leaders, but total destruction had been averted through their mediation. Now, however, it will be different. Judgment to come is announced and described graphically in verse 2. Captivity is explicitly mentioned, as are four kinds of affliction. Jeremiah cites the lingering effects of Manasseh as reasons for the inevitability of judgment. This accusation has parallels in 2 Kings 21:1–18; 23:26; 24:3–4, where the judgment to come on Judah and Jerusalem in Jeremiah's day derives from the overflowing wickedness of Manasseh's reign.⁴

Bridging Contexts

JUDGMENT THROUGH DROUGHT. The common theme of Judah and Jerusalem's plight before God is given the specific coloring of the devastation of drought. Along with it will come sword, famine, and pestilence (Jer. 14:12). Apart from the emphasis on the drought, the reader encounters a familiar aspect of the book of Jeremiah.

During Jeremiah's time, lack of water was a persistent experience. The weather pattern in the eastern Mediterranean is such that from late spring through mid-fall, there is no rain. Thus, the later fall and winter rains are necessary for the spring planting. Not only was drought a crippling phenomenon, it was a graphic reminder of how dependent life is on forces outside of human control. Even today, water rights and distribution are major issues in the Middle East. One of the sorest points in the peace agreement between Israel and Jordan has been the distribution of water from the Jordan River to the two countries. Israel is seeking agreements with Turkey for fresh water supplies.

In 2:13 the prophet proclaimed that Judah's sin was forsaking God (who is living water) in the vain effort to preserve water in broken cisterns (other gods). In chapter 14 the reality of drought is used to chasten and judge Judah. The failure of Judah's other prophets to interpret God's judgment is indicated in 2:8, a claim also elaborated in chapter 14.

Amos, one of Jeremiah's predecessors in the prophetic office, announced drought and famine as God's judgments on Israel (Amos 4:6–13). God's word through the prophet's refrain in Jer. 4:8–11, "yet you have not returned to me," is similar to God's word to Jeremiah that he will not respond to Judah's fast or sacrifices because they have not returned wholeheartedly to him. Amos also spoke forebodingly about the ultimate famine and thirst—the lack of a life-giving word from God (8:11–14). This was a word of judgment, so that when at last people would recognize their needs and seek to assuage them, it would be too late. Such is the intention also behind Jeremiah's words in Jeremiah 14.

In the New Testament John the seer sees God's judgments poured out on the land as the seals of the prophetic scroll are broken (Rev. 6). These judgments are depicted as different horsemen, and among them are the sword, famine, and pestilence. John's vision is very much in the mode of Old Testament prophecy, but it was also intended to instruct the church so that it could see behind the temporal judgments the hand of God moving toward an even larger deliverance. Likewise, Jeremiah's contemporaries are to see God's hand moving in judgment, but beyond judgment Jeremiah's readers should recognize that God moves toward deliverance.

God and the weather. The last line of Jeremiah 14 ends the lament with the confession that the people will "hope ... in" (or "wait for") God, who

has done all these things. This confession is both problematic and a key link between Jeremiah's world and modernity. It is problematic because many people recoil from the belief that God causes things like droughts and famines. Weather forecasters daily explain atmospheric conditions through various media, and the connection between God and weather conditions is not clear for many people.

Perhaps it is best to distinguish between the claims of a particular passage and the continuing interplay of forces in seasonal change. Jeremiah's claim is *not* that God sends all droughts to chastise and judge people. Instead, his claim is more particular: God used the specific drought described in chapter 14 as a means to address and chastise his people. It is as perilous to universalize from the specifics of a particular text as it is to ignore the possibility that a moral and sovereign God makes use of climactic forces. Jeremiah 14 is essentially a claim that God so used the circumstances of the prophet's day to instruct Judah.

It is the same issue with the divine claim in 14:11 that Jeremiah should no longer pray for the people because God will not listen. This is not a universal affirmation about how God treats the prayers of his prophets or his people; rather, 14:11 is a specific instruction about God's intentions in bringing Judah to judgment. God's disposition toward prayer and his employment of drought are particular approaches in his approach to Judah. God had most certainly listened to the prayers of Moses and Samuel—they were renowned as intercessors. Modern readers are confronted with the claim that this is God's prerogative and that it will ultimately serve his broader purpose of (re)forming a people for himself.⁵

Admittedly, some people will recoil in horror and deny that God will ever refuse to hear the prayer of Judah or send drought on its land. Such a denial, however, is different from the error of universalizing; it is the error of assuming that they know better than God how to achieve his purposes within history. Does the thought that God is indifferent about climactic conditions provide more comfort? It is not likely that those who refuse God the avenue of drought will allow God the freedom to judge at all. It would be no different with a cross and the death of a righteous man. Why, God forbid such a thing!

THE TRUE JUDGE. The confessions/petitions of chapter 14 continue to have significance for God's people because they remind us that God alone is the true Judge of our deeds and the true Savior of our lives (14:8). Modern people act wisely when they acknowledge that they are neither masters of their destiny nor spiritually self-sufficient. This is a fundamental point for modernity: How can the chastening hand of God be recognized? How might God grasp the attention of people and seek to remove the intellectual and emotional barriers to his approach set up by the modern mindset?

Indeed, the confessions/petitions are uncomfortable reminders that people are ultimately unable to avoid an encounter with the living God. Nevertheless, the One who evoked tears in the prophet is the ultimate Hope of Israel, and it is the larger design of Jeremiah's book (as it is the larger design of God Almighty) to move the people in the direction of praise and good works.

In the first half of 1996 the author experienced a prolonged drought in central Texas. It was a humbling experience to stand on the bank of the Pedernales River that typically has flowing water and excited people engaged in recreational activities to see only a dry and cracked stream bed. It was frightening to watch things wilt, animals die, and people lose their vitality because of the scarcity of water. It was a powerful illustration of the connectedness of corporate existence. The lack of water was the impetus to a variety of changes in central Texas, both physical and emotional. It is true that people will change their lifestyle and assumptions about reality when circumstances force it! They will usually do so grudgingly, however, and more often than not they will find someone or something else responsible for the debilitating circumstances. Is this dynamic a clue to the harsh reception of the corporate confessions/petitions in 14:7–9, 19–22?

Many prayers for rain are heard frequently during months of drought. Arid conditions are an effective reminder of how easily life can get out of balance and how circumstances of drought can only be ameliorated from above. Nevertheless, when rain finally comes (as it did in August 1996), drought conditions are quickly forgotten. Jeremiah 14 is a salutary reminder of the true source of life and of the One who calls a people into existence for his glory and praise.

Jeremiah 15:10-21

10 Alas, my mother, that you gave me birth, a man with whom the whole land strives and contends!
I have neither lent nor borrowed, yet everyone curses me.

¹¹The LORD said,

"Surely I will deliver you for a good purpose; surely I will make your enemies plead with you in times of disaster and times of distress.

12"Can a man break iron—
iron from the north—or bronze?
13Your wealth and your treasures
I will give as plunder, without charge, because of all your sins
throughout your country.
14I will enslave you to your enemies
in a land you do not know,
for my anger will kindle a fire
that will burn against you."

15 You understand, O LORD; remember me and care for me. Avenge me on my persecutors.
You are long-suffering—do not take me away; think of how I suffer reproach for your sake.
16 When your words came, I ate them;

they were my joy and my heart's delight,

for I bear your name, O LORD God Almighty.

¹⁷I never sat in the company of revelers, never made merry with them;

I sat alone because your hand was on me and you had filled me with indignation.

¹⁸Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable?

Will you be to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails?

¹⁹Therefore this is what the LORD says:

"If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me; if you utter worthy, not worthless, words, you will be my spokesman.

Let this people turn to you, but you must not turn to them.

20 I will make you a wall to this people, a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you but will not overcome you,

for I am with you to rescue and save you,"

declares the LORD.

²¹"I will save you from the hands of the wicked and redeem you from the grasp of the cruel."

Original Meaning

JEREMIAH 15:10–18 contain a lament/complaint on the part of the prophet with reference to divine judgment in verses 12–14, while verses 19–21 are a reply from God. In literary context this material follows upon the oracles presented in 14:1–15:9, where the people offered two corporate confessions/petitions (14:7–9, 19–22) and Jeremiah responded with a lament on behalf of God (14:17–18). One way to interpret the bitter lament/complaint in 15:10–18, therefore, is to see it as a culminating reaction to the people's failures, the impact of the drought, and the pressure on Jeremiah from prophets who were offering oracles of peace to a desperate nation—all of which are depicted in 14:1–15:9.

This section is actually structured around a give-and-take conversation between prophet and God, which unfolds as follows:

- A. 15:10: Jeremiah laments the day of his birth and the curses of people that are now directed at him.
- B. 15:11: God replies that he will deliver Jeremiah for a good purpose.
- C. 15:12–14: God pronounces judgment on the people.
- D. 15:15–18: Jeremiah expresses his frustrations to God.
- E. 15:19–21: God replies to Jeremiah.

There are difficult textual and syntactical issues involved in the translation of this section, particularly with verse 12, a verse that has a significant role in the way the lament/complaint is interpreted. Parts A and B, and then parts D and E, show the pattern of prophetic lament/complaint followed by divine reply. The middle portion (15:12–14), however, both interrupts the pattern and appears addressed to Judah. Perhaps the best option is to interpret verses 12–14 as a word from the Lord pronouncing judgment on Judah.

15:10. In this verse Jeremiah laments his birth (cf. also 20:14–18, as well as the first lament of Job in Job 3:1–26). This provides another, somewhat broader context in which to hear the language of personal woe. Jeremiah is similar to Job. His contemporaries curse him, and the pain of his ostracism has made even God seem deceitful and unreliable to him.

In lamenting the day of his birth, Jeremiah offers an evaluation of his life and prophetic ministry. He feels as if there is no purpose for him to continue to live. The parallel with the lament of Job suggests that we are dealing with a recognized literary motif. It is tantamount to the conclusion of the Teacher in Ecclesiastes that it would be better not to have been born (Eccl. 4:1–3). Such language should be taken seriously as an indication of despair, though not literally as the announcement of suicide. Jeremiah describes the "curses" that have come to him, even though he has neither lent nor borrowed. The troubles that come from either activity are legendary. Again, Jeremiah employs a traditional motif to make his point (cf. Job 6:22; Ps. 15:5).

- **15:11.** God replies that he will deliver Jeremiah for a "good purpose" and will bring his enemies to a place where they will need to plead with him. This last comment perhaps leads to the further pronouncement of judgment on Judah in verses 12–14.
- 15:12–14. As noted above, the text of verse 12 and the interpretation of these three verses is difficult. The best overall option is to see all three verses as a judgment speech on Judah. They repeat material found in 17:3–4, where the context is clearly judgment on the people.
- 15:15–18. Jeremiah turns once again to the Lord. As part of his lament/complaint he notes that his enemies are also God's enemies. Jeremiah suffers his reproach because he represents God's word to the people. In verse 16 he describes his encountering of God's word with the surprising claim that he "ate" them and they became his joy. This may refer to his willing acceptance of God's previous revelation to him (cf. 1:9). Possibly verse 16 refers to a literal "finding" of a text, for the verb that the NIV translates as "came" literally means to be found. Whether this means that Jeremiah was instructed by a document like the book of the covenant discovered during Josiah's reign or another preserved text (Hosea?) cannot be known. The emphasis falls on the prophet's joy at that time as opposed to the despair and rejection he now encounters.

Jeremiah confesses that it is God's hand that he feels on him, that God is the source of the indignation he experiences. As his emotions boil over, the prophet asks God why his (Jeremiah's) pain is unending and why he (God) has become like failing water. 15:19–21. God's reply is not to deal with the particulars of Jeremiah's anger but to remind him that the path of the faithful and obedient prophet is still open to him. One should not conclude that Jeremiah has failed or that God has failed the prophet, but rather that God has called him to prophesy in this historical hour of judgment. Jeremiah has received the reward typical for a prophet who announces judgment (i.e., persecution; cf. Matt. 5:10–11).

Verse 19 has two plays on the verb "turn/return" (šub). If Jeremiah will "repent" (i.e., change his tune and direction), then God will "restore" him. These are the NIV renderings of šub in both cases. Moreover, using the same verb, God states that the people should "turn" to Jeremiah, but that Jeremiah should not "turn" to them. Verses 20–21 are reminiscent of Jeremiah's initial "call" in 1:18–19. He still has the same task ahead of him and the same assurance that God is with him.

Bridging Contexts

JEREMIAH'S LAMENTATION IN 15:10, 15–18 has many echoes in Scripture, including several places elsewhere in Jeremiah. Being rejected by one's contemporaries is deeply painful, and the human toll it takes is evident in the prophet's candid language. The joining of this lament with the announcement of judgment in 15:1–9 shows the link between the people's rejection of God (15:6) and their rejection of God's prophet (15:16–17). These rejections are two sides of the same coin.

Jeremiah's plea for judgment on his accusers and tormentors is a prayer for justice. If God intends to judge his people for their failures, then Jeremiah prays for a just verdict on those who slander God through attacking his prophet. Jeremiah's reproach results from his role as one called by God's name and one who delights in God's Word (cf. Ezek. 3:3). Suffering comes to one who stands for God's Word in evil times.

God does not reply directly to the prayer for judgment on the oppressors; instead, he reminds Jeremiah that his restoration from humiliating circumstances is simply to return to his role as mouthpiece for the Lord.⁵ There is no warrant in the prophet's lament to carry out personal retribution. The jarring language of the lament is the humanness of the prophet stretched almost to the breaking point. It is a reminder that ministry is not

about success or happiness but about faithfulness. Even in his despair Jeremiah's lament is evidence that he still "fought the good fight" (1 Tim. 6:12).

Contemporary Significance

ACCOUNTABILITY. Instruction for God's people today comes in various ways from these somber verses. It is necessary, first of all, to face the scriptural claim that God holds his covenant people (and ultimately all people) accountable for their actions. This is as true in the case of individuals as it is in corporate terms. Jeremiah 15:1–9 contained words of judgment in historical terms (e.g., the sword, captivity) for corporate failure. This is the context in which to read the lament of 15:10–21. They should be a lesson for any subsequent generation of God's people. A secular historian might explain Judah's demise in terms of ancient Near Eastern power politics and tragic miscalculations; the eyes of faith discern divine chastisement and discipline in the tragic events of the Babylonian assault and the Exile.

Should believers today ask about trends in the life of the church today that bode ill for the future? Are there signs even now that God has given (will soon give?) individuals or communities over to the folly of their actions? Does this include the maligning of persons who carry out their discipleship in controversial ways?

The references to Moses and Samuel in 15:1–9 served as a reminder of the great privilege of intercessory prayer, even if their prayers would not have helped the people of Jeremiah's day. Mention of these two great prophets is of no value were it not for the claim that they had, in fact, led God's people through tumultuous times and that they were valiant in prayer on behalf of the people. We should listen to Jeremiah's own prayers about himself in light of their witness. In a time of despair the prophet is inclined to think his life is a total failure, and he sees little evidence that God is with him supportively. Yet God hears all his frustration and replies.

The prophet's pain. Ministry can be painful and costly. Jeremiah's lament shows one of God's chosen vessels suffering because of his service to God. His life is an Old Testament form of Jesus' call to discipleship: Take up your cross and follow me. Even when stretched seemingly to the

breaking point, God reminds Jeremiah of his call to prophetic ministry. For the prophet there is no alternative but to turn (return) once again to the Lord, who called him and promised him protection.

Jeremiah's lament is an understandably human response to mistreatment. Likely it was therapeutic for him to cry out. God does not answer directly his plea for vengeance, at least on Jeremiah's own scale of justice (15:15), any more than God will answer our own pleas for judgment according to our scale of judgment. Judgment must be left to him (Rom. 12:17–21). Jeremiah can at least understand that much; that is why he prays for God to vanquish the oppressors.

Christians can see in Jeremiah a prophetic mediator whose office points forward to a suffering Savior, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame (Heb. 12:2). Christ's prayers included intercession even for the oppressor, although he too experienced the mysterious absence of God as he poured out his life on the cross. Jeremiah's own prayer for vindication and judgment on the oppressor is part of his plea to God that he not violate his promise of protection to him. It takes seriously God's prerogative to deal sovereignly with evil; yet his prayer can be reframed in light of Jesus' own example of intercessory prayer.

Perhaps one of the ways to grasp the significance of Jeremiah's lament(s) for modern appropriation in North America is to take seriously the tone. His laments are not like a majestic hymn of praise from the Psalter or the enthusiastic praise music so popular in segments of the church today. They have more of a point of contact with the "blues music" spawned in the African American culture. The blues have been an important contributor to both traditional soul music and vibrant gospel singing in African American churches. With the blues comes an articulate voice for the range of human experience, particularly the down times. A classic blues composition is "The Thrill Is Gone," by the legendary B. B. King. For over thirty years that song has been a catalyst for those who have sought a voice to express their despair or grief. The tone of the song is a mournful one, and the words lament a relationship gone wrong.

Singing the blues or hearing them sung is similar to pouring out one's heart in prayer to God. That is why there is such a strong connection between blues and gospel music. King himself has stated that he wants to

record a gospel album before he retires because he is convinced that the blues lead one to gospel. The same can be said for a lament like Jeremiah's. He faces his doubts and tormentors, gives voice to unease and anger, and gives all of it to God.

Adult Sunday school classes usually discuss the Lord's Prayer as a standard model for Christian prayer. One of its petitions is that God will deliver the disciple from evil. There are times in which following the claims of the gospel and practicing one's faith will lead directly into encounters with evil. One of the marvelous gifts of Jeremiah's book is the humanness of his prayers when wearied and depressed by the struggle with rejection and persecution. Zeal for the path of discipleship (in the case of Jeremiah, zeal to carry out his prophetic commission) is no guarantee of smooth sailing in life. God will hear the prayers of his disciples—unlike those prayers from the dark hour of Judah's judgment—just as God heard Jeremiah's cries.

Jeremiah 16:1–21

THEN THE WORD of the LORD came to me: ²"You must not marry and have sons or daughters in this place." ³For this is what the LORD says about the sons and daughters born in this land and about the women who are their mothers and the men who are their fathers: ⁴"They will die of deadly diseases. They will not be mourned or buried but will be like refuse lying on the ground. They will perish by sword and famine, and their dead bodies will become food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth."

⁵For this is what the LORD says: "Do not enter a house where there is a funeral meal; do not go to mourn or show sympathy, because I have withdrawn my blessing, my love and my pity from this people," declares the LORD. ⁶"Both high and low will die in this land. They will not be buried or mourned, and no one will cut himself or shave his head for them.

⁷No one will offer food to comfort those who mourn for the dead—not even for a father or a mother—nor will anyone give them a drink to console them.

8"And do not enter a house where there is feasting and sit down to eat and drink. ⁹For this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Before your eyes and in your days I will bring an end to the sounds of joy and gladness and to the voices of bride and bridegroom in this place.

10"When you tell these people all this and they ask you, 'Why has the LORD decreed such a great disaster against us? What wrong have we done? What sin have we committed against the LORD our God?' 11 then say to them, 'It is because your fathers for sook me,' declares the LORD, 'and followed

other gods and served and worshiped them. They forsook me and did not keep my law. ¹²But you have behaved more wickedly than your fathers. See how each of you is following the stubbornness of his evil heart instead of obeying me. ¹³So I will throw you out of this land into a land neither you nor your fathers have known, and there you will serve other gods day and night, for I will show you no favor.'

¹⁴"However, the days are coming," declares the LORD, "when men will no longer say, 'As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt,' ¹⁵but they will say, 'As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the Israelites up out of the land of the north and out of all the countries where he had banished them.' For I will restore them to the land I gave their forefathers.

¹⁶"But now I will send for many fishermen," declares the LORD, "and they will catch them. After that I will send for many hunters, and they will hunt them down on every mountain and hill and from the crevices of the rocks. ¹⁷My eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from me, nor is their sin concealed from my eyes. ¹⁸I will repay them double for their wickedness and their sin, because they have defiled my land with the lifeless forms of their vile images and have filled my inheritance with their detestable idols."

¹⁹O LORD, my strength and my fortress, my refuge in time of distress,
to you the nations will come from the ends of the earth and say,
"Our fathers possessed nothing but false gods, worthless idols that did them no good.
²⁰Do men make their own gods?

Yes, but they are not gods!"

21"Therefore I will teach them—
this time I will teach them
my power and might.

Then they will know
that my name is the LORD.

Original Meaning

THIS CHAPTER RANGES widely over the themes of sin, judgment, and restoration. Jeremiah's own life is to be a prophetic witness to the historical judgment soon to strike the land. As is common in the first half of the book, no regnal dates are provided by which one can set these instructions in a more particular context of the prophet's life.

- 16:1–9. God commands Jeremiah not to marry or have children (v. 2), since judgment is coming soon and many parents and children in Judah will die. There are, perhaps, at least two reasons for including this command as part of the book. (1) In a society where marriages were arranged between families, celibacy was comparatively rare. Thus, Jeremiah's celibacy might surface as a "hot-button" issue for his detractors to seize upon. They can portray him as crazed and out of touch with reality. But Jeremiah's celibacy is not a denial of the goodness of marriage or even the voicing of his own preferences in the matter. For all we know, he may well have desired a wife and children. Yet his desires, like much about his personal circumstances, recede behind the presentation of his prophetic work.
- (2) Since destruction is imminent, this is no time for marriage (vv. 3–5). His celibacy is part of his embodiment of the message he proclaims; it is a symbolic act as surely as was Hosea's marriage of a prostitute (Hos. 1–3) or Ezekiel's refusal to mourn publicly the death of his wife (Ezek. 24:15–27). Note Paul's similar statement in 1 Corinthians 7:25–35.

Jeremiah is not to enter a house for feasting or celebration either (Jer. 16:8–9), for the joy of bride and groom will also be silenced in the coming devastation. Here again he bears the mark of his ministry. Perhaps the lament of 15:17–18 reflects the personal cost to the prophet of his "sitting alone."

- 16:10–13. This text presupposes that Jeremiah passes on the substance of the Lord's messages to him about constricting his social activities. Judgment is at hand. "Why such judgment?" the people ask. The answer is the familiar (to readers of the book) and crushing reply that both ancestors and the current generation have forsaken the Lord, been disobedient to his instruction, and served other deities. The current generation is particularly recalcitrant and motivated by an evil heart (cf. 17:1, 9). The punishment for "defiling" (v. 18) God's land is to be cast from the land and humiliated in exile by worshiping other deities. Crime and punishment in this case are linked like sowing and reaping.
- 16:14–15. These verses announce an abrupt change through the rhetorical formula, "The days are coming." God announces that the judgment of the Exile will be matched by the saving exodus from foreign territory and back to the Promised Land. Here succinctly is the same wondrous claim as given in Isaiah 40–55. These two verses predict the formation of a new proverbial saying about God: He "who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt" will bring back the banished from their exile in the north (cf. Jer. 23:7–8).
- 16:16–18. These verses are difficult to interpret in context. Verse 18 makes it clear that God is speaking about bringing judgment upon the failures of Judah, so that we see a return to the language of historical judgment. The announcement of fishing and hunting for offenders in foreign lands, however, is obscure. Perhaps they are a reply to the sarcasm of people who say that in exile God will not see and judge them for their sins. Certainly Jeremiah affirms that God is not limited by geography or spatial distance in bringing to pass what he desires.
- 16:19–21. The chapter concludes with the voice of one who prays on behalf of himself and his sinful people. Contextually this must be Jeremiah, for the concluding verse makes it clear that God is behind the sentiments expressed and that he intends to teach his people a lesson about his power. Along with the confession of the people's sinfulness is an affirmation that "the nations will come" to God. God is the prophet's refuge and strength—characteristics that separate him from the folly of idols. This in turn leads to the declaration that God has acted in history in order that people may know that his name is Yahweh (cf. Ex. 6:3).

Bridging Contexts

PATTERN. Jeremiah 16 contains the classical pattern of this book: God announces judgment on Jeremiah's contemporaries as his righteous response to Judah's spiritual corruption; the future, however, contains the promise of redemption from the land of exile, where Judeans surviving the Babylonian onslaught will be taken. For subsequent generations these words of judgment become words of instruction on what to avoid. The prophecy about redemption provides hope for Judeans in exile (one of the first groups to read/hear parts of the written collection of Jeremiah's prophecies). For generations of God's people after the Babylonian exile, the "second exodus" of the people from Babylonian captivity was testimony to the faithfulness and forgiveness of God. It would indeed become proverbial, as 16:14–15 indicate.

In 16:18 there is a connection with the proclamation of the prophet in Isaiah 40:1–2. The vocabulary is different but the content is similar: The Exile is a complete punishment for the sinfulness of Judah and Jerusalem, a double payment for her failure to obey. The prayer of Jer. 16:19–20 draws on the spiritual resources now preserved in the book of Psalms. God the Judge is also a Fortress and Protection to his people, who have learned the folly of idolatry and who find security in the Lord, their Redeemer.

Marriage. Marriage was a mark of adulthood in ancient Israel, and families routinely arranged the marriages of their sons and daughters. The Old Testament provides no evidence of celibacy as an institution of society, although Jesus validates it as a part of discipleship (Matt. 19:10–12). Jeremiah's celibacy is wrapped up in his prophetic office and his call to embody his message. To hear that word in a modern context could mean foregoing marriage for the sake of ministry (as have priests and orders in the Catholic tradition and some missionaries in the Protestant tradition) or giving up something else as a sign of Christian faith. This can be taken on an individual level (as is required for marriage!) or on a corporate level, when a body of Christians "gives up" something for the sake of its ministry and witness.

God's will. Verse 21 emphasizes God's will to make his name known. Probably the claim is not for simple cognition, as if neither Judah nor neighboring people had previously known that God had a personal name (YHWH, usually pronounced Yahweh).² The personal name Yahweh was

first emphasized in the saving events of the Exodus (Ex. 3:1–15; 6:1–3)—events that revealed God's commitment to his promises and his people in ways that amazed both Israelite and Egyptian. In the proclamation of Judah's demise and the bold announcement that there is redemption beyond demise, readers encounter the claim that God's name indicates his identity as God of the future and that the Lord's self-manifestation in historical events is for his honor and glory.

Typology. These verses set up a typology between ancient Israel and the church, based on their respective callings as God's people. More particularly, the expectation about the future provides a bridging mechanism for subsequent generations who find themselves in an analogous situation to the Judean remnants of Jeremiah's day. In light of Christ's first advent, Christians look in faith to a future revelation of God's glory. The companionship that God provides through the Holy Spirit and the life of the church is an interim period, like that of saints in the Old Testament who lived in eschatological hope.

Contemporary Significance

TRUE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD. Interpreters can take 16:21 and find in it an angle of vision that unites the chapter. God desires to make himself known, which gives shape ultimately both to world history and the life story of an individual Christian. As noted elsewhere, knowledge of God is not mere intellectual comprehension or cognition—the devil and his minions believe that God exists (James 2:19). True knowledge of God is formed in relationship with him and in obedience to his claims of exclusive worship. God serves as a fortress and refuge to those who trust him and who humbly seek to follow his revealed will. God is also a righteous Judge, whose timing in judging iniquity should not be confused with either indifference or caprice.

John Calvin proposed in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that true knowledge of one's self is bound together with the relational knowledge of who God is. Many subsequent interpreters have followed his viewpoint, and it is certainly consistent with the claim of Jeremiah 16. The fall of Judah and the subsequent exile of many Judeans were not simply events of power politics in the late seventh/early sixth centuries B.C.; they were part of a

judging and refining process undertaken by God the Lord, who sought to make himself known to his people.

God is both Judge and Redeemer. Knowledge of him impels one to recognize our sinfulness just as knowledge of our sinfulness can—by God's grace—lead us to know God as both Judge and Redeemer. Christians recognize a similar pattern in the events of the cross and resurrection. Through these events God made himself known as Judge of all the world and Redeemer of those who trust in him through Jesus Christ, his Son, who also bore the name Lord. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom. 10:13; cf. Phil. 2:9–11).

The cost of discipleship. Jeremiah's celibacy reminds Christians of the cost of discipleship. In certain circles of the church, the family has taken on nearly idolatrous status. The good news is that Christians are rightly concerned about the dissolution of the primary social unit of society (= the family), but marriage and family are not ultimate in the life of faith. God uses those who are widowed or never married, or even those who are married and without children, in special ministries. God's kingdom is full of servants whose celibacy and/or childlessness have become more than a social mark; they have become occasions for God's kingdom to grow.

Protestants can learn something from their brothers and sisters in the Catholic tradition. The call of ministry may include celibacy. Those who answer the call are in a sense "married" to the Lord and his larger family of disciples. They are whole persons who have chosen a different "symbolic act" through which to exercise their faith.

One of the most distinguished evangelical spokesmen in the twentieth century, John R. W. Stott, never married. His personal views on the goodness of marriage and family are well known. The fruit of his rich ministry as an Anglican clergyman, including valuable publications and a long series of public travels for preaching and lectures, is testimony to the use of the time he had as a single person. He continues to embody his ministry.

Calvin's prayer at the end of his meditation on Jeremiah 16 is worth quoting and pondering.

All-powerful God, you are not content to give only one small corner of the earth to your servants; you are pleased to extend your kingdom to the ends of the earth and make your home with us through your only Son in whatever place we are. Give us the grace that we may offer ourselves to you in sacrifice. Give us the grace to arrange our lives in obedience to your Word, that your name be glorified in us and by us, until finally we are made participants in the eternal celestial glory acquired through your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ.³

Jeremiah 17:1–27

1"Judah's sin is engraved with an iron tool, inscribed with a flint point, on the tablets of their hearts and on the horns of their altars.
 2Even their children remember their altars and Asherah poles beside the spreading trees and on the high hills.
 3My mountain in the land and your wealth and all your treasures I will give away as plunder, together with your high places, because of sin throughout your country.

⁴Through your own fault you will lose the inheritance I gave you.

I will enslave you to your enemies in a land you do not know, for you have kindled my anger, and it will burn forever."

⁵This is what the LORD says:

"Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD.

⁶He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes.

He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives.

7"But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD,

whose confidence is in him.

⁸He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream.

It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green.

It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit."

⁹The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.

Who can understand it?

¹⁰"I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind.

to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve."

¹¹Like a partridge that hatches eggs it did not lay

is the man who gains riches by unjust means.

When his life is half gone, they will desert him,

and in the end he will prove to be a fool.

¹²A glorious throne, exalted from the beginning, is the place of our sanctuary.

¹³O LORD, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you will be put to shame.

Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the LORD,

the spring of living water.

¹⁴Heal me, O LORD, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise.

15They keep saying to me,
"Where is the word of the LORD?
Let it now be fulfilled!"

¹⁶I have not run away from being your shepherd;

you know I have not desired the day of despair.

What passes my lips is open before you.

¹⁷Do not be a terror to me; you are my refuge in the day of disaster.

18Let my persecutors be put to shame, but keep me from shame;
let them be terrified, but keep me from terror.
Bring on them the day of disaster; destroy them with double destruction.

¹⁹This is what the LORD said to me: "Go and stand at the gate of the people, through which the kings of Judah go in and out; stand also at all the other gates of Jerusalem. ²⁰Say to them, 'Hear the word of the LORD, O kings of Judah and all people of Judah and everyone living in Jerusalem who come through these gates. ²¹This is what the LORD says: Be careful not to carry a load on the Sabbath day or bring it through the gates of Jerusalem. ²²Do not bring a load out of your houses or do any work on the Sabbath, but keep the Sabbath day holy, as I commanded your forefathers. ²³Yet they did not

listen or pay attention; they were stiff-necked and would not listen or respond to discipline. ²⁴But if you are careful to obey me, declares the LORD, and bring no load through the gates of this city on the Sabbath, but keep the Sabbath day holy by not doing any work on it, ²⁵then kings who sit on David's throne will come through the gates of this city with their officials. They and their officials will come riding in chariots and on horses, accompanied by the men of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, and this city will be inhabited forever. ²⁶People will come from the towns of Judah and the villages around Jerusalem, from the territory of Benjamin and the western foothills, from the hill country and the Negev, bringing burnt offerings and sacrifices, grain offerings, incense and thank offerings to the house of the LORD. ²⁷But if you do not obey me to keep the Sabbath day holy by not carrying any load as you come through the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle an unquenchable fire in the gates of Jerusalem that will consume her fortresses."

Original Meaning

JEREMIAH 17 CONTINUES the pattern of collecting the prophet's disparate sayings according to topics. Readers will find more than one theme or subject matter in these verses, although they are concerned primarily to communicate the reasons for the failure of Judah and Jerusalem, primarily its sinful condition. This chapter offers no indication of a precise setting in Jeremiah's life for this report or any of the poetic material.

The prophet has adopted and adapted some well-known traditions in both poetry and prose to make his case. One theme is the corruption of the human heart (17:1, 5, 9). Another appears to be an adaptation of Psalm 1 to indicate the self-incurred failure of human pride (Jer. 17:5–8). Verses 9–11 are almost proverbial in form and draw on the sapiential traditions (cf. Prov.

16:1–9). There is even praise of God in this chapter (Jer. 17:12–14), which leads the prophet to lament his circumstances and to pray for judgment on his persecutors (17:15–18). Finally, in a prose report the Lord urges Jeremiah to stand in public and proclaim the significance of the Sabbath as a means of honoring God and preserving a form of spiritual order to public life (17:19–27). Failure to keep the Sabbath will result in judgment on Judah and Jerusalem; thus the chapter ends with the familiar claim of divine judgment to come.

17:1–4. This brief passage—that Judah has rejected God's instruction and will be judged accordingly—is similar to many preceding parts. For example, Jeremiah spoke metaphorically about the heart before. Judah's heart is in need of circumcision (4:4; 9:25). The people are "senseless" (5:21; lit., "without heart"); they have "stubborn and rebellious hearts" (5:23; 7:24; 9:14; 11:8). Here the metaphor is also a play on the formulation of the Decalogue as the content of God's covenant with Israel: "He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets" (Deut. 4:13). Judah's sinfulness is described as "engraved with an iron tool ... on the tablets of their hearts." This metaphor underscores the indelible nature of sin and its corrosive effects on the people.

Verse 2 mentions the "Asherah poles" (NIV) as evidence for Judah's defection from the Lord, along with the people's embracing of false worship. The Hebrew word is 'ašerim, a plural word literally meaning Asherahs. The NIV assumes that the plural refers to a cultic implement, and this is likely correct, whether a pole or tree or some other totem object. Asherah is also the name of a goddess worshiped in the ancient world. In recent years several inscriptions have been discovered in and around the ancient territory of Judah that mention Asherah in the singular. On more than one occasion there is the reference to "YHWH and his Asherah." These texts demonstrate a kind of unhealthy syncretism, if not outright polytheism, from the time of Jeremiah and other prophets. According to 2 Kings 23:4–7, part of King Josiah's reforming measures in the temple precincts were the destruction of vessels made for Baal and Asherah, the removal of the Asherah (an idol? NIV "Asherah pole"), and the tearing down of weaving areas for Asherah.

Once more the prophet employs the familiar metaphor of inheritance (nah^ala) to speak of judgment. Canaan is actually the Lord's inheritance, but the people were granted a life in it as part of God's covenant promises to them. Punishment means they will lose their place in his inheritance.³ This is tantamount to saying they have lost their place in the household (i.e., family) of the Lord.

- 17:5–8. This passage reads like a "play" (i.e., a serious pun) on Psalm 1. Jeremiah draws a contrast between the one who is cursed ('arur') and the one who is blessed (baruk). These two terms are used in the great listings of curses and blessings in Deuteronomy 27–28. The contrast is between trust in human effort and design, and reliance on God.
- 17:9–13. These verses elaborate on the theme of the previous unit. Human commitments, and especially the deeds that proceed from them, have consequences that an observant person should take to heart. Two verses are like a proverb in their brief "systems analysis." (1) Verse 9 represents the heart as the seat of human deceitfulness. The depths of its possible depravity are difficult to measure. Indeed, only God can accurately measure it. According to verse 10, this knowledge, which belongs to God, enables him to "reward a man according to his conduct." The connection between act and consequence is important in the wisdom traditions of the Old Testament (e.g., Proverbs). Such a connection is further elaboration of the blessing-and-curse contrast presented in the previous unit. Part of what God does in overseeing blessings and curses is to connect the disposition of the human heart and the deeds that flow from it. This is not a law of physics but the operation of a sovereign God, who cannot be bound rigidly by a formula.
- (2) Verse 11 is another proverbial statement: Riches gained unjustly are like a bird hatching eggs it did not lay. Here again the connection between act and consequence is set out. Jeremiah's use of this proverb suggests a connection between Judah's "gains" from idolatry and the sad loss of its land and freedom. Only a fool (*nabal*) would want such gains.
- 17:12–13. These two verses join the blessing of the sanctuary (almost certainly the one in Jerusalem) with God's presence as "the spring of living water" (cf. 2:13). That God is "the hope of Israel" has been used by Jeremiah before (14:8).

17:14–18. Here is another of Jeremiah's laments. Verse 14 draws a connection between healing and saving. Healing likely means the kind of restoration of emotional spirit and physical well-being that only God can grant. Since Jeremiah has been the object of scorn and ridicule as well as physical oppression (e.g., 20:1–6; 38:1–13), his acceptance by God is crucial to his survival. In verse 15 the prophet reports to God that he has been verbally abused by those who ridicule his prophecies. Their question ("Where is the word of the LORD?") points to the as-yet unfulfilled prophecies of disaster.

In poignant fashion the prophet reminds God that he has walked the path of discipleship. He has taken no joy in announcing a day of despair. It is almost as if waiting for the prophecies of disaster to be fulfilled has made Jeremiah feel separated from God, so he prays that God will be his "refuge" when disaster falls. He also prays that God will deal strictly with his persecutors, so that they will know for certain that the prophecies Jeremiah delivered have come to pass and that in opposing Jeremiah they were opposing the word and prophet sent by God.

17:19–29. This is an autobiographical report in prose. It functions like a sermon on the fourth commandment of the Decalogue (Deut. 5:12–15) to keep the Sabbath day holy. Some scholars see in this section an example of editorial work, whereby the compilers of Jeremiah's prophecies added a statement on the importance of the Sabbath for exilic or early postexilic readers. Since it is generally acknowledged that the institution of the Sabbath grew in importance in the exilic and postexilic periods, there is a certain plausibility to this conclusion.

It is just as plausible, however, that one of Jeremiah's own forms of prophetic indictment includes a reference to the people's failure to maintain the integrity of the Sabbath day and that this indictment is intended to instruct the communities in exile, who had questions about the status of their covenant relationship with the Lord. In his temple sermon, Jeremiah charged the people with several failures, including theft, murder, and perjury (Jer. 7:9). These terms come from the Decalogue. The charge of violating the Sabbath is simply another example of his using normative covenant traditions in his critique of the people.

Jeremiah's minisermon on the Sabbath, furthermore, has the familiar "two-way" formulation. This is entirely in keeping with the poetic texts that

precede it. For example, the blessing or curse formulation in 17:5–8 is a brief exposition of the two-way paradigm. Here, keeping the Sabbath holy will result in receiving God's blessing, while failure to do so will bring destruction on Jerusalem.

Note that Jeremiah's specific accusation concerns carrying loads on the Sabbath, (i.e., working rather than refraining from labor). Resting from work helped make the Sabbath day holy. If God's people honor him by keeping the Sabbath, then not only Jerusalem but the various regions of Judah will be inhabited, and right worship will be offered to the Lord. This is the one place in the chapter that suggests a role for repentance and renewed obedience to God's law.

Bridging Contexts

THE SINFUL HUMAN CONDITION. The repeated references to the corruption of the heart in chapter 17 indicate the seriousness of Judah's predicament; this failure is deeply rooted in the essence of Judah's identity before God. The same sense of corruption and failure is true in the broader critique in 17:5–11. Jeremiah's portrayal of human fallibility has links with other biblical writers (Old and New Testament), who in varying degrees see sinfulness not just as a harmful deed or process but as a condition of human existence.

The prophetic critique, generally speaking, saw human sinfulness as a condition that mitigated against Israel or Judah's ability to reform themselves. If the human heart was corrupt and seemingly incapable of reformation, then Ezekiel, Jeremiah's younger contemporary, would proclaim nevertheless that Judah should make for itself a new heart and new spirit (Ezek. 18:31). But can reformation be done adequately from the human side? Note how this same prophet proclaimed that God would be the One to give his people a new heart and spirit so that they might walk in obedience to his commandments (Ezek. 11:19; 36:26; cf. Deut. 30:6; Jer. 24:7).

Corruption is not something to be defined in rational terms, for it can manifest itself in mysterious ways, nor is it amenable to easy explanation or removal. Indeed, sinfulness as a condition of human existence is not something to be "fixed" by human effort. Jesus noted that it is not what goes into a person that causes permanent defilement (such as a particular food), but what proceeds from the human heart (i.e., the volitional center of an individual) that demonstrates corruption (Mark 7:20–23). Paul assumed the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of the human species, and he understood the advent of Christ as God's decisive countermeasure (Rom. 1:16–3:26).

Modern Western people begin from a doctrine of individuality that makes the corporate thinking of biblical writers more difficult to grasp. One of the necessary bridges from Jeremiah's world to modernity is to work with the more individualistic mentality of the present so that people can affirm the truths of a common humanity (before God!) and the insights of someone like Reinhold Niebuhr, whose classic work on *Moral Man and Immoral Society*⁷ points out how all people participate in a social identity that defines, at least in part, who they are.

A primary reason why human sinfulness is so devastating is that the condition is terminal. Corruption and sin beget more of the same, and that vicious cycle can only be broken from God's side. The rhetorical question of Paul, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24), has been answered from God's side. Jeremiah's own proclamation fits this orientation: Only God can heal Judah's brokenness. In Jeremiah's world (or that of the New Testament), people did not think in modern psychological terms, and such concepts as repentance or new birth were not submerged into a therapeutic model (as is often the case in modernity). It is not necessarily wrong to cast the human plight in behavioral terms such as addiction or compulsion as long as one acknowledges the terminal condition and human culpability (the scriptural claim of sinfulness).

The Sabbath. Jeremiah's words about the Sabbath partake of the larger biblical teaching about the sanctity of the seventh day and the requirement that Israel be holy as the Lord their God is holy (Lev. 19:2). The sanctification of the Sabbath is the bridge commandment in the Decalogue (Ex. 20:8–11), mediating between those commands to relate rightly to God (20:3–7) and those commands to relate rightly to one's family and neighbor (20:12–17). Sabbath-keeping is a pattern rooted in divine disclosure (Gen. 2:1–3) and an activity blessed by God. Although Jesus offered severe criticism of a legalistic interpretation of the Sabbath (e.g., Mark 2:24–3:6), he acknowledged its divine origin and purpose.

The shift on the part of most churches to worship on the first day of the week (Sunday) is an example of bridging the gap between Jeremiah's world and Christian affirmation. Christ's resurrection on the Sunday morning of the first Easter has given a new orientation to the Sabbath injunctions for rest and holiness.

Contemporary Significance

THOUGHTS ON HUMAN SINFULNESS. Jeremiah's assumptions about human sinfulness contribute to a fuller biblical doctrine of sin. In contemporary Western culture, where individual culpability is seldom discussed apart from the decision of law courts, a concept of corporate human failure has also waned as a significant issue for discussion. Recovering the doctrine of the corporate nature of sin and its universal effects on individuals is a necessary condition for the proclamation that God has spoken decisively to the world in Jesus Christ.

In the modern West, among the places perhaps to start a conversation is the prevalence of addictive behavior, racism, and random violence. All three of these phenomena in Western societies are symptomatic of larger issues of human existence, and they stand under the judgment of God's Word. Nevertheless, they defy easy explanation or cure. They are irrational, and they lead to more of the same in spirals of self-destruction.

Perhaps another way to hear these words of Jeremiah for today is to see the increasing secularization of society as a judgment rooted in the hubris of the human heart. Most versions of secularization in the West (myths of progress and technological security) are ultimately foolish attempts at selfdeification. Their fruits will not be technological emancipation from human problems, but like the partridge with eggs it did not hatch, humankind will find that it does not possess the key to its own salvation.

Keeping the Sabbath. Jeremiah informs his contemporaries that keeping the Sabbath is one of the keys to honoring God. In essence he says: "Don't work." There is nothing explicit about worshiping on the Sabbath in Jeremiah's minisermon. In fact, one can search the whole Bible and find little about worshiping on the Sabbath. This fact should not be misunderstood; the Bible has a lot to say about the worship of God, but the Sabbath day is not the place for that discussion. "Don't work," Jeremiah

says. If you go to the Decalogue, it is the same. There is nothing direct about worship in the fourth commandment; rather, it is to set the Sabbath day apart. That is what holiness means. Even God followed that pattern in creation (Gen. 1:24–31).

For many people, it is easy to draw a negative image from the insistence on "no work," and even easier to think immediately of Jesus' reply to the Pharisees: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Many sermons have been preached about Jewish legalism and the Sabbath with the goal of convincing Christians that Sunday (the Christian "Sabbath") should not fall prey to Pharisaical legalism. Of course Christians don't want to be legalists, but isn't it ironic that the Sabbath commandment not to work has become identified in the minds of some Christians with works righteousness and legalism, a kind of external religion? Christians don't want to make the Sabbath rest a negative institution, but does this commendable goal also inevitably blunt the force of the Sabbath commandment for modern appropriation?

Christians don't have to identify the Sabbath day with Saturday or Sunday nor think of a Sabbath rest in a legalistic way as a twenty-four-hour period (Col. 2:16–17). But what should they do? This will vary somewhat from culture to culture, but for many middle-class Christians in North America, perhaps the Sabbath commandment can point to a way of living that says work and busy schedules do not define us. Rather than thinking about the Sabbath as a legalistic prop for works righteousness, perhaps one should think of the Sabbath rest as a supreme example of God's grace. What could be more grace oriented than a refusal to live by work and through human achievement? Perhaps a Christian Sabbath can become a sign in a busy, tension-packed world that disciples will not live by work alone but through the rest and renewal that comes from God. Perhaps the sanctifying of a day or period in the week for rest can become a provisional illustration to the world of faithful Christian existence, where one is initiated in the process of loving God and enjoying him forever.

Jeremiah 18:1–19:15

THIS IS THE word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²"Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message." ³So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. ⁴But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.

5Then the word of the LORD came to me: 6"O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the LORD. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. ⁷If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, ⁸and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. ⁹And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, ¹⁰and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.

¹¹"Now therefore say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, 'This is what the LORD says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions.' ¹²But they will reply, 'It's no use. We will continue with our own plans; each of us will follow the stubbornness of his evil heart.'"

¹³Therefore this is what the Lord says:

"Inquire among the nations:
Who has ever heard anything like this?

A most horrible thing has been done

by Virgin Israel.

14Does the snow of Lebanon
ever vanish from its rocky slopes?

Do its cool waters from distant sources
ever cease to flow?

15Yet my people have forgotten me;
they burn incense to worthless idols,
which made them stumble in their ways
and in the ancient paths.

They made them walk in bypaths and on roads not built up.

¹⁶Their land will be laid waste, an object of lasting scorn; all who pass by will be appalled and will shake their heads.

¹⁷Like a wind from the east, I will scatter them before their enemies:

I will show them my back and not my face in the day of their disaster."

¹⁸They said, "Come, let's make plans against Jeremiah; for the teaching of the law by the priest will not be lost, nor will counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophets. So come, let's attack him with our tongues and pay no attention to anything he says."

19 Listen to me, O LORD;
 hear what my accusers are saying!
 20 Should good be repaid with evil?
 Yet they have dug a pit for me.
 Remember that I stood before you and spoke in their behalf to turn your wrath away from them.
 21 So give their children over to famine;

hand them over to the power of the sword.

Let their wives be made childless and widows; let their men be put to death, their young men slain by the sword in

²²Let a cry be heard from their houses when you suddenly bring invaders against them,

battle.

for they have dug a pit to capture me and have hidden snares for my feet.

23But you know, O LORD,
all their plots to kill me.
Do not forgive their crimes
or blot out their sins from your sight.
Let them be overthrown before you;
deal with them in the time of your

anger.

19:1This is what the LORD says: "Go and buy a clay jar from a potter. Take along some of the elders of the people and of the priests ² and go out to the Valley of Ben Hinnom, near the entrance of the

Potsherd Gate. There proclaim the words I tell you,

³and say, 'Hear the word of the LORD, O kings of Judah and people of Jerusalem. This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Listen! I am going to bring a disaster on this place that will make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle.

⁴For they have forsaken me and made this a place of foreign gods; they have burned sacrifices in it to gods that neither they nor their fathers nor the kings of Judah ever knew, and they have filled this place

with the blood of the innocent. ⁵They have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as offerings to Baal—something I did not command or

mention, nor did it enter my mind. ⁶So beware, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when people will no longer call this place Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter.

⁷"In this place I will ruin the plans of Judah and Jerusalem. I will make them fall by the sword before their enemies, at the hands of those who seek their lives, and I will give their carcasses as food to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth. ⁸I will devastate this city and make it an object of scorn; all who pass by will be appalled and will scoff because of all its wounds. ⁹I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and daughters, and they will eat one another's flesh during the stress of the siege imposed on them by the enemies who seek their lives.'

10"Then break the jar while those who go with you are watching, ¹¹ and say to them, 'This is what the LORD Almighty says: I will smash this nation and this city just as this potter's jar is smashed and cannot be repaired. They will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room. ¹²This is what I will do to this place and to those who live here, declares the LORD. I will make this city like Topheth. ¹³The houses in Jerusalem and those of the kings of Judah will be defiled like this place, Topheth—all the houses where they burned incense on the roofs to all the starry hosts and poured out drink offerings to other gods."

¹⁴Jeremiah then returned from Topheth, where the LORD had sent him to prophesy, and stood in the court of the LORD's temple and said to all the people, ¹⁵"This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'Listen! I am going to bring on this city and the villages around it every disaster I pronounced against them, because they were stiffnecked and would not listen to my words.'"

Original Meaning

THESE TWO CHAPTERS do not preserve dates in Jeremiah's career, and it is possible, but not necessary, to interpret them as recording two successive acts of the prophet. But it is also possible that the events of visiting a potter and visiting the Valley of Ben Hinnom to break a pot are separated by months or even years. Probably the two accounts are placed together as part of a catchword principle or the habit of topical collection (both deal with prophetic signs using pottery). In any case, there is much to be said for taking the two chapters together. Both function in this book as a means of illustrating the slide of Judah into irreversible failure. They are linked, furthermore, with chapter 20, where Jeremiah is publicly humiliated (cf. 20:1).

The basic literary units of the two chapters may be set out as follows:

- A. 18:1–17: The prose description of a visit to the potter's house (vv. 1–12) is followed by a poetic oracle of God's response (vv. 13–17).
- B. 18:18: Jeremiah's opponents plan an attack on him.
- C. 18:19–22: Jeremiah laments his circumstances and prays for vindication.
- D. 19:1–13: Jeremiah takes a pot to the Valley of Ben Hinnom and breaks it as a symbol of God's judgment to come.
- E. 19:14–15: Jeremiah goes to the temple to announce God's judgment on the land.
- 18:1–17. Readers receive an account of Jeremiah's visit to a potter's workshop and commentary on its significance. Verse 1 is clearly the work of Jeremiah's editor(s). What is reported, however, has an autobiographical element still preserved (the "I" of 18:3; the "me" of 18:5). For his contemporaries, Jeremiah's visit to the workshop and his announcement of God's word have the profile of a symbolic act, what might be termed a parable in action. Jeremiah's readers and hearers can use their imagination to envisage the workshop and the efforts of a potter to shape wet clay into a vessel ready to be fired and then used as a container.

God (the potter) has the sovereign right to make and remake the clay as he sees fit. Wet clay is malleable, which means it is capable of being formed in a variety of shapes. But it is also capable of collapsing its shape or of being ill-mixed and thus unsuitable for firing. Not just any wet clay will do, and not just any individual can shape a vessel properly. It takes a correct mixture of clay and the skills of a trained artisan to form² a pot for successful firing.

The meaning of this illustration is clear. Just as the potter may form and reform the same clay until he is either satisfied or decides to dump the clay completely, so God can form and reform the house of Israel. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel" (v. 6). This affirmation of God's sovereign right over the people he has formed is followed by the "two-way" formulation of God's dealings with any nation. If God announces judgment on a nation and that nation repents, then that judgment can be reversed or simply canceled. Correspondingly, if God has announced goodness for a kingdom and it acts faithlessly, then that good can also be reversed. The Hebrew verbs used for "uproot," "tear down," and "destroy" in verse 7 and those for "build" and "plant" in verse 9 are the same ones used in the call of Jeremiah to be a prophet to the nations (1:10).

The two-way formulation implies that a wholehearted repentance on the part of Judah can avert the judgment that looms over them. If so, it seems likely that this passage comes from an earlier period in the prophet's public ministry, when he held out the hope that Judah and Jerusalem could make the necessary changes in public life.³ Verse 12, however, puts a quote in the mouth of the people to the effect that they will follow their own stubborn heart. This quote, of course, is Jeremiah's portrait of them, based on their actions and (non-)reception of his prophecies. Judah will not repent, and irrevocable judgment will come.

God does not take "no" for an answer easily. The poetic reply in verses 13–17 begins with an indignant question: "Who has ever heard anything like this?" (cf. also the incredulous charge in 2:10). An appalling thing has happened; God's people have forgotten him and worshiped other deities, worthless idols unable to help them. Verse 17 has a surprising metaphorical "turn" to it: In the coming day of judgment, God will show his "back" ('orep)⁴ to the people and not his face.

18:18–23. Jeremiah's opponents are again the issue. In verse 18 they intend to attack him verbally and pay no attention to anything he says. Their persecution of the prophet shows that they have also rejected God's word to them (and to Judah) that Jeremiah represents. They prefer the words of other mediators of God's will to the judgmental pronouncements of Jeremiah. Note the three forms of mediating God's will: the priest with *tora* (NIV "law"), counsel from the wise, and the word from the prophet. The point seems to be that although they reject Jeremiah, they will not lack for other sources of guidance.

In verses 19–23, in another personal lament, Jeremiah prays for God's judgment on his enemies. His harsh words come in the context of a prayer for vindication from God and for a temporal judicial sentence by God on those who malign him. The metaphor he uses is that of a pit dug by his opponents (18:20, 22), a pit designed to catch him. It is a hunting image, a trap laid to catch prey, but also a proverbial symbol. Jeremiah prays, in essence, that his enemies may fall into the pit they have dug. He asks God to oversee the consequences of their acts rather than for a personal opportunity to judge them. Since they have committed an evil in attacking an innocent person, may the evil they intend fall back on them.

19:1–13. God now instructs Jeremiah to perform another symbolic act (a parable in action), also with a pottery jar. Presumably the actions described were carried out, though only the instructions and a brief report in 19:14–15 remain. God commands Jeremiah to buy an earthenware jar and to take a group of elders and priests to the Valley of Ben Hinnom where the Topheth, a place for human sacrificial rites, is located. This valley is situated immediately south of the temple mount area and continues to the western side of the old city of Jerusalem. Before he breaks the jar in the valley of slaughter and burial, Jeremiah must prophesy judgment on the kings of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. The failures of these addressees are listed as the worship of other gods, the spilling of innocent blood, and especially the worship of Baal through the burning of children in a sacrificial fire.

With the breaking of the jar, Jeremiah indicates the irrevocable judgment to come. Just as the smashed earthenware cannot be repaired, Judah cannot be reformed. For original hearers and readers there is likely added significance to the earthenware pot. The Topheth was not only the place of

ceremonial slaughter; it likely also contained a section where earthenware jars with the charred remains of sacrificial victims were collected. Similar places are known in Phoenicia (Tyre and Achzib) and among Phoenician colonies in the western Mediterranean (e.g., Carthage).

Jeremiah understands the Topheth as a place of defilement and its earthenware jars as symbolic of slaughter. Indeed, he gives the valley a devastating nickname—"the Valley of Slaughter" (cf. 7:32, where the same name change is given). Judgment will come on Jerusalem in such a way that there will be no other place to bury the dead except in the Topheth, the place of ritual slaughter and cultic defilement. One of the characteristics of Topheth is the crowded nature of the burial section, where pots full of bones and charred remains are stacked together.

19:14–15. Jeremiah leaves the Topheth and goes to the courtyard of the temple to proclaim that God will "bring on this city and the villages around it every disaster I pronounced against them, because they were stiff-necked and would not listen to my words." His presence in the temple courtyard is tantamount to bringing the defilement of the Topheth into the temple, as any reader familiar with the purity laws of the Old Testament would recognize (a cemetery or a corpse rendered a person ceremonially unclean). Furthermore, the reference to "stiff-necked" people catches up the failure of the people to recognize the possibility of repentance that was announced as possible in 18:7–11.

Bridging Contexts

THE EDITORIAL ARRANGEMENT of chapters 18–19 is a key to how the original acts and words of Jeremiah are to instruct later readers. From the potter's workshop, through the prophetic lament of persecution, to the shattering scene at the Topheth, the progression of the accounts confirms Judah's guilt and the irrevocable judgment on the historical horizon. Later readers are told in no uncertain terms why Judah fell to the Babylonians. It was God's just judgment. With the enumeration of Judah's sins, later readers are also asked to search their own lives to see if they too are guilty of these failings.

On interpreting prophecies. In addition to the instruction about the past, later readers are confronted with a teaching about the prophetic word that opens their present and future to God (18:7–11). How should they interpret

unconditional prophecies of judgment or peace? Concerning judgment, Jeremiah announces that God will "relent" when people repent of their evil deeds. Correspondingly, God will "reconsider" the good when a people fall into sinful behavior. Some prophecies explicitly contain conditional elements within their formal structure. The issue for later readers, however, is whether unconditional prophecies should be understood as determinism (as unalterable) or as an expression of God's resolve to act in light of particular circumstances, a resolve that may change as historical circumstances themselves change and as God moves toward the fulfillment of his temporal purposes to a yet grander design.

With respect to the word "relent" (Heb. *nḥm*) in Jer. 18:8, some translations render it as "repent." The theological issue at stake is not God's repentance from evil or whether God is fickle; rather, the issue is how to account for the personal activity of God who responds as Judge and Deliverer in the historical process. Jonah, for example, did not understand God as fickle when God "relented" over Nineveh's changed circumstances. The prophet believed all along that God was slow to anger and abundant in mercy—and for that reason, he knew that God might use Jonah's own unconditional prophecy of judgment as a means by which to effect change in Nineveh (Jonah 3:1–4:11).

The question of interpreting prophecies about the future is a fundamental one for interpreters who wish to bring God's announcements about the future from the Old Testament into the present: How is God the final interpreter of his own Word? Some interpreters will see in prophecy a blueprint for things as yet unrealized; others will see primarily a teaching about God's moral resolve that preserves his freedom to act in surprising ways.

In Jer. 18:12 the indictment of the people because of their stubborn and evil heart catches up the theme of the heart's corruption in the larger context. The saying also sets the stage for the portrayal of the people as "stiff-necked" in 19:15. God will hold true to his announced judgment where an ingrained evil is in evidence; but even so, the possibility of change is open to the descendants of the evil generation as God uses even the harsh words of a previous judgment to call his people to repentance.

Potter and clay. The potter's workshop takes up the theme of God's sovereignty over the things he has made. It is the right of the potter (who

knows what potential the clay has) to remake and to reform a vessel until it is suitable. At an interpretive level, this analogy of potter and clay fits the question of God and unconditional prophecy. Theological reflection begins by asking the purpose for which God sent a prophetic word in the past. God may reshape his future dealings with his people in light of what that Word accomplishes among them or among those who read it (even much later). It is not so much a single fulfillment of prophecy that Christians should look for as a constant encounter with prophecy and with the God who makes sovereign use of prophecy in different contexts.

Paul took up this analogy of potter and clay in his reflection on the state of Israel according to the flesh and God's larger design in calling the Gentiles to new life in Christ (Rom. 9–11). It is God's sovereign right as the "potter" to make a common vessel (and to judge it) as it is to select one for special service (9:19–21). The apostle saw in God's sending of Christ the outworking of a plan to bind all over "to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all" (11:32). God's sovereign mercy is the foundation of the apostle's wrestling with the difficult subject of Israel's disobedience and her future. He was convinced that Israel's rejection of Christ as the Messiah was a hardening of the heart that God could use. It would not mean the final rejection of Israel but the opportunity for the Gentiles. God is a merciful and righteous "potter," not a puppet master pulling chains.

Persecution and vindication. In his lament over his circumstances Jeremiah once again finds himself in the setting reserved for prophets and disciples. He is persecuted and rejected by contemporaries because of his words and deeds. As a result he prays for God's judgment on the persecutors. Readers do well to remember that what Jeremiah seeks is judicial sentencing, not personal vengeance. At the same time, we see the amazing grace of the Christ who prays for his enemies when we recognize the legitimacy of Jeremiah's lament and his desire for vindication. Grace is indeed unmerited favor when someone is faced with the legitimacy of judgment.

Contemporary Significance

WORDS OF JUDGMENT. As with the previous words of judgment in Jeremiah, one avenue of appropriation moves along the way of

demonstrating God's righteousness in the face of ingrained evil. Since the book is filled with passages proclaiming judgment, modern readers are given many opportunities to reflect on God's ways with the world. If, for example, we see the hand of God judging the failures of communism in the fall of the Berlin Wall, are we able to see any correcting hand in the Vietnam War and its tragic aftermath or in the continuing struggles over civil rights? Some, perhaps many, North American Christians may want to equivocate in assessing these last two matters, but Christians from other cultures may want to encourage North Americans to take a second, prayerful look for a judging and correcting hand. The emphasis on judgment and on Judah's failure to repent can be instructive to modern readers, if only to remind them that it is an awesome thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

The symbolic acts of the prophet (potter's workshop, broken jar) remind us that ministry calls for the embracing of society and even the embodiment of God's message through acts of service. Jesus' own ministry, whether in judgment or deliverance, was replete with symbolic acts and signs that conveyed the essence of his message. Jeremiah's confession that he had stood before God and prayed for the people (Jer. 18:20) is testimony to the cost of discipleship. A community that has not prayed for the lost and has not interceded for the wicked will not be able to have a prophetic ministry.

God's word of judgment is not unalterable for those with ears to hear and eyes to see. The wonder of Jeremiah's announcement that God can "relent" and "reconsider" is not that God can change approaches to bring about his purposes. It is the wonder that God opens up ways of transformation and change in the midst of sinful and painful circumstances. What is resistant to change is not God's messages about the future but people stuck in self-destructive activities.

God's sovereignty. Jeremiah's description of the potter opens up avenues to explore the classical doctrine of God's sovereignty. It is usually fruitless to discuss God's power and purpose in the abstract. Power for what and about whom? A philosophical description can constrict and thereby control, since it is anthropologically generated. God's power, what is often called God's omnipotence, is known in relationship. Similarly with respect to God's goodness and predestination, his power and goodness are discovered in relationship and only acknowledged adequately by those who have

committed themselves to know God. The proclamation that God judged Judah is not news of interest to later readers unless it somehow instructs them about the ways of God, to whom they too are related by confession.

Confidence in the potter comes finally in knowing the potter, not in observing him spin the wheel and shape the clay from the vantage point of a supposed neutrality. The Pauline reflection on the potter (Rom. 9:18–24) develops this point profoundly and in a manner consistent with the book of Jeremiah. The clay does not have the right to question the potter; but much more significant is the claim that the potter has intentions of preparing vessels for his glory and fit for his mercy. In the process of fulfilling these purposes, vessels can be shaped and reshaped and used in ways not understood by the vessels themselves. Their "essence" is not thereby violated but taken up and used by the God of grace.

In authentic discussions about God's purpose and goodness, there is an inherent reference to a future entrusted to God; it is a future not completely understood from a finite human perspective. One is called to trust in the work of the potter, to walk by faith and not by sight, and to accept God's judgment in the present in the hope that the Potter will reshape the future.

Certainly one of the stupendous events of the twentieth century happened with the collapse of Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, beginning with the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. The impact of this collapse is still being worked out. Each state has its own version of the impact as do the churches in the region. Can anyone say for sure where the collapse will lead? No Christian should doubt the role of God in this process; the contribution of the churches to the collapse is widely recognized. Here is a paradigm of the surprising providence of God being worked out. Was the collapse predicted in the Old Testament? Not precisely, but the God who reshapes history and speaks authoritatively is revealed in the Old Testament, and he is still at work.

Jeremiah 20:1–18

WHEN THE PRIEST Pashhur son of Immer, the chief officer in the temple of the LORD, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things, ²he had Jeremiah the prophet beaten and put in the stocks at the Upper Gate of Benjamin at the LORD's temple. ³The next day, when Pashhur released him from the stocks, Jeremiah said to him, "The LORD's name for you is not Pashhur, but Magor-Missabib. ⁴For this is what the LORD says: 'I will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends; with your own eyes you will see them fall by the sword of their enemies. I will hand all Judah over to the king of Babylon, who will carry them away to Babylon or put them to the sword. ⁵I will hand over to their enemies all the wealth of this city—all its products, all its valuables and all the treasures of the kings of Judah. They will take it away as plunder and carry it off to Babylon. ⁶And you, Pashhur, and all who live in your house will go into exile to Babylon. There you will die and be buried, you and all your friends to whom you have prophesied lies."

⁷O LORD, you deceived me, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me.
⁸Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction.
So the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long.
⁹But if I say, "I will not mention him or speak any more in his name," his word is in my heart like a fire,

a fire shut up in my bones.

I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.

10 I hear many whispering, "Terror on every side! Report him! Let's report him!" All my friends are waiting for me to slip, saying, "Perhaps he will be deceived; then we will prevail over him and take our revenge on him."

11 But the LORD is with me like a mighty warrior; so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail.
They will fail and be thoroughly disgraced; their dishonor will never be forgotten.
12 O LORD Almighty, you who examine the righteous and probe the heart and mind, let me see your vengeance upon them, for to you I have committed my cause.

13Sing to the LORD!

Give praise to the LORD!

He rescues the life of the needy from the hands of the wicked.

14Cursed be the day I was born!
May the day my mother bore me not be blessed!
15Cursed be the man who brought my father the news, who made him very glad, saying, "A child is born to you—a son!"
16May that man be like the towns

the LORD overthrew without pity.

May he hear wailing in the morning, a battle cry at noon.

¹⁷For he did not kill me in the womb, with my mother as my grave, her womb enlarged forever.

¹⁸Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?

Original Meaning

THE CHAPTER MAY BE DIVIDED into two parts: a prose account of Jeremiah's arrest and public humiliation (20:1–6), and a lengthy and poignant personal lament/complaint (20:7–18). The poetic lament perhaps combines material from two different settings, put together with the account of his humiliating incarceration to illustrate his emotional response. There is no reason to doubt, of course, that the bitter words of the lament reflect the way a person might react to human indignities. Nevertheless, it may not have been first composed by Jeremiah while in the stocks but something he took (and adapted?) from the traditional forms of lament/complaint and applied to his circumstances. Whatever the origin(s) of these verses, they serve to illustrate the pain and frustration of the prophet as he suffers abuse at the hands of the religious establishment.

No date is provided for the chapter, but there is indirect evidence for the events in the reign of Jehoiakim (609–598 B.C.). The prediction that Pashhur will die in captivity in Babylon implies a date before 597. The majority of narrative accounts that are set in the period before Zedekiah's reign come from Jehoiakim's time as ruler. One cannot make too much of this, however, since the next chapter (which refers to a second Pashhur) dates to the reign of Zedekiah. Possibly the word against Pashhur the priest anticipates the fall of the city in 587/586. In either case, chapter 20 sums up a decisive period in Jeremiah's prophetic career as it is now laid out in the prophetic book; the painful prayer in 20:7–18 is the last in a series of personal laments/complaints, and it brings the wounded feelings of the prophet to a boiling point.

20:1–6. Pashhur, the priest who orders Jeremiah beaten and placed in the stocks, is from a well-known priestly division (Immer, 1 Chron. 24:14). He represents the religious establishment, especially the priests who care for and officiate at the temple. In fact, he is described as the "chief officer" at the temple. This probably means among other things that he heads the security detail for the large complex, providing oversight for the levitical personnel who keep the gates and who restrict access to and activities within the temple courts. Perhaps his role as chief officer explains his choice of the Upper Gate of Benjamin for the place of Jeremiah's temporary incarceration in the stocks. He controls that area; moreover, that location (likely on the north side of the temple complex) bears a lot of traffic.

Pashhur is from a segment of the population who prove to be some of Jeremiah's most persistent persecutors. The humiliation of being placed in the stocks² and beaten by a priest may have been especially galling for Jeremiah, since he too is from a priestly family. With the temple looming in the background, Jeremiah's treatment is portrayed as God's judgment on him, carried out by the priests who care for God's house. Upon his release, Jeremiah gives Pashhur a new name, "Magor-Missabib," which in Hebrew means "terror all around." This term occurs elsewhere in Jeremiah to describe the plight of Judah when the foe from the north comes against the state and its capital city (Jer. 6:25; cf. 46:5; 49:29).

Jeremiah announces in the name of the Lord that Pashhur has "prophesied lies" and that he will enter Babylon as a captive (v. 6). This is an interesting use of the verb "to prophesy." Pashhur is by profession a priest; there is no record about his speaking. Perhaps his actions against Jeremiah are a form of prophecy; they were most definitely "symbolic," in a sense not unlike Jeremiah's visit to the Valley of Hinnom and his coming to the temple complex to prophesy (19:14–15). Indeed, Jeremiah's prophetic witness in the temple may have prompted his arrest and thrashing. As a priest, however, Pashhur almost certainly took the opportunity to speak a word of judgment in public about Jeremiah and his actions. These would take the form of repudiating Jeremiah's words and actions and claiming divine judgment on him.

20:7–18. Jeremiah's lament is linked contextually to his humiliating and painful experience in the stocks. His words are by now (for sequential readers of the book) familiar, yet at the same time shocking.³ The prophet is

persecuted because of "the word of the LORD" (20:8). His persecutors lie in wait to ambush him and ridicule him with his own phrase, "terror on every side" (20:10), as if to say that Jeremiah is a deluded madman who speaks incessantly about terror to come. In his frustration and bitterness Jeremiah accuses God of "deceiving" him (20:7), a strong term that can also refer to seduction.⁴ The prophet has reached his wits' end and is unable to articulate a sense that God will rescue him from this situation.

This dilemma is excruciating for Jeremiah. God's word is like a fire within him, and he is unable to resist the urge to speak, even if the "violence and destruction" of which he speaks brings ridicule and physical harassment. His frustration with God comes in the fact that Pashhur, a priest of God(!), had spoken against him and humiliated him in public. Had not God promised to be with Jeremiah and to protect him? Yet God's own official representative has carried out this attack on him.

Verse 11 affirms that God is indeed strong to save. In context this means that the prophet's persecutors will fail. The next verse affirms that God is an infallible Judge and will see to the judgment of the persecutors. Jeremiah's prayer in this respect takes on the form of setting his "cause" (*rib*) before God.

The prophet also rues the day he was born (20:14–18; cf. 15:10), as he, like Job, suffers unjustly. It is difficult to know whether the lament/complaint of 20:7–18 should be read sequentially, as if the movement of the prayer/complaint is significant. If so, it suggests that Jeremiah goes back and forth in his confidence and on his resolve to carry out his prophetic work. That should surprise no one who takes seriously the humiliation suffered in the Upper Gate.

Bridging Contexts

Persecution of the righteous. The account of Pashhur's humiliation of Jeremiah is but one in a long series of scriptural accounts of the persecution of the righteous. It is important to be clear here: Jeremiah is righteous, not perfect. There is a difference. He seeks to be faithful to the prophetic call given him by God. To this extent he is righteous. He is also innocent of criminal activity. In ancient Israel, someone who was innocent when accused of a crime was called righteous (saddiq).

Yet when Jeremiah is ridiculed and persecuted because of his prophetic calling, he becomes moody, seeking vindication in the public's eye because of his humiliation. His laments (including 20:7–13) make clear the reason for his persecution. From Joseph to David, and in a prophetic line from Elijah straight to Jeremiah, God's servants have faced opposition and persecution. David complained to God about his circumstances with respect to Saul's irrational persecution of him. Elijah fled to Mount Horeb to inform the Lord that he was the only one left who was zealous for the Lord, and Jezebel was after him (1 Kings 19:1–18). Disciples cry to God for sustenance and deliverance because their circumstances may require it!

Indeed, one can move forward through the line of faithful witnesses to John the Baptizer and the early Christian martyrs. The English term *martyr* is based on the Greek word for those who "bear witness" in times of persecution. This Greek word was applied to early Christians who gave testimony to their faith, often at the point of the sword. Christ himself is the greatest example of the phenomenon of righteous suffering, although his suffering is redemptive in a way that the others are not (see further under Contemporary Significance).

Jeremiah's lament/complaint takes up the voice of the innocent sufferer, whose words are common in the book of Psalms. To whom else can one turn with the burdens of the heart, if not to God? Jeremiah prays like the saints of the Psalter, who pour out their hearts to God. That Jeremiah's lament/complaint turns accusatory toward God probably results from two additional factors. (1) The more certain factor is the call of Jeremiah (Jer. 1:5–19), where the young prophet-to-be is assured of God's protection and ultimate vindication. "Where is God's vindication?" he must have wondered while in the stocks and the object of ridicule. (2) More subjectively perhaps, Jeremiah's human frailty makes him feel that God is finally responsible for his fate. Close to the end of his endurance, he wonders why God has led him down this path; and if God has so led him, will he be stretched beyond his limits and be abandoned after all?

Shame. Shame was a powerful mechanism in the ancient world, and Jeremiah suffers public shame for his attempt to be faithful to his prophetic call. In moving to a modern context, it may be important to explore the different ways in which shame is or (increasingly) is not influential. Is there a modern counterpart to the social force of shame in antiquity? It remains

more or less in force in many non-Western settings, but it appears increasingly less influential in the modern West. In any case, Jeremiah's humanity is exposed for what it is: a condition where physical and emotional pain reach intense levels and he is in need of divine grace. Can God know how Jeremiah feels? Here is a bridge to Christology and a point of contact for all generations.

Contemporary Significance

REDEMPTIVE SUFFERING. It should not take much imagination on the part of Christians to see the parallels between Jeremiah's suffering and that of Christ's humiliation and suffering. Religious leaders complained about Christ and sought to trap him. He was humiliated in public and ultimately crucified. His cry of dereliction from the cross was taken directly from a psalm of lament/complaint (Ps. 22:1; Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34). Perhaps most important, even the fate of the Son of God was cast into the hands of the Father, who seemed withdrawn at the moment.

But we should not rob Jeremiah of his humanity and the poignancy of his life by simply jumping to the New Testament and comparing him with Christ. He and other righteous sufferers are not "just like Christ." Their suffering, however poignant and unjust, is not redemptive for other people, although it can be instructive. One may, however, describe the prophet's life as a *via dolorosa* precisely because his public life and that of Christ are part of a larger pattern. Jeremiah suffers because he is a prophet of God. His suffering shares the suffering of God's people, and it is prophetic in the sense that it points to the perfect Mediator, whose suffering is representative of guilty and innocent suffering alike.

Those who oppose God's Word will oppose Jeremiah. It is the prophetic office that adorns Jeremiah's life and leads him down the path of suffering. In his public ministry Jesus brings the prophetic office of the Old Testament to fruition, and through his Sonship fills out the significance of a prophetic ministry in profound ways.

There is much to learn from the frank expression of Jeremiah's human limitations. One may—with Christ's help—bear innocent suffering with a certain grace. But it is no failure of Jeremiah's that he feels crushed by the burdens of the prophetic office. What he gets finally is a taste of the

insidious opposition to the Word of God that cloaks itself in all manner of religiosity and patriotism. He experiences the sinking feeling that not only is all lost but that God seems involved in his pain. It will take the humiliation of Christ for the redemptive element of suffering to emerge, but in his own way Jeremiah suffers on our behalf. He demonstrates what it is like to feel the burdens of human failure and personal frustration as a part of his calling, and he does so to instruct us about the cost of discipleship and also for a testimony that God is faithful still—beyond our finite comprehension and in spite of our complaints.

Recently Carlos Lavernia, a Texan convicted of rape, had his conviction overturned after having served fifteen years in prison. Because some supporters kept pestering the relevant court system, DNA testing was finally done on the semen and blood samples taken from the scene of the rape, and the tests proved his innocence with respect to the crime. Two things stood out in his statement upon the release of the findings. (1) He expressed thankfulness to God for finally being set free from responsibility for this crime. (2) But he also felt deep anger at the cost (in terms of time, emotions, reputation) inflicted on him by a wrong conviction and punishment. He recounted briefly how many times during his incarceration he doubted whether he would ever be vindicated. He questioned God's goodness too. Time and time again he wrote letters to protest his innocence. But he never gave up on his hope or on God.

Mr. Lavernia has been convicted of other crimes, so he has not been freed from incarceration. There is a lot about him still unknown to the public; nevertheless, he has served fifteen years in jail for a crime he did not commit. For fifteen years he wrote letters and offered prayers. At times he thought no one heard them, but he was wrong. So may it be with the heartfelt laments of God's children.

Jeremiah 21:1–10

THE WORD CAME to Jeremiah from the LORD when King Zedekiah sent to him Pashhur son of Malkijah and the priest Zephaniah son of Maaseiah. They said: ²"Inquire now of the LORD for us because Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon is attacking us. Perhaps the LORD will perform wonders for us as in times past so that he will withdraw from us."

³But Jeremiah answered them, "Tell Zedekiah, ⁴ This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I am about to turn against you the weapons of war that are in your hands, which you are using to fight the king of Babylon and the Babylonians who are outside the wall besieging you. And I will gather them inside this city. ⁵I myself will fight against you with an outstretched hand and a mighty arm in anger and fury and great wrath. ⁶I will strike down those who live in this city—both men and animals and they will die of a terrible plague. ⁷After that, declares the LORD, I will hand over Zedekiah king of Judah, his officials and the people in this city who survive the plague, sword and famine, to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and to their enemies who seek their lives. He will put them to the sword; he will show them no mercy or pity or compassion.'

8"Furthermore, tell the people, 'This is what the LORD says: See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death. 9Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague. But whoever goes out and surrenders to the Babylonians who are besieging you will live; he will escape with his life. ¹⁰I have determined to do this city harm and not good, declares the LORD. It will be given into the

hands of the king of Babylon, and he will destroy it with fire.'

Original Meaning

READERS ARE PROVIDED here with a date in Judah's anguished history—one of the few dates given in the first half of the book. Zedekiah is king—the first reference to the last king of Judah since the superscription to the book (1:3)—and the date is ca. 588 B.C. With the Babylonian army surrounding Jerusalem, a royal official named Pashhur the son of Malkijah and a priest named Zephaniah are sent to Jeremiah for him to inquire of the Lord. Perhaps God will work one of his "wonders," so that the Babylonians will withdraw. There is, of course, historical precedent for this hope. In a previous century God had sent a judging angel among the besieging Assyrians (2 Kings 18–19; Isa. 36–39).

The name of one of the officials (Pashhur) is the same as that of the priest in Jeremiah 20, although they are two different people. In the proximity of the two accounts, readers will find something of the catchword principle at work in the compilation of Jeremiah's book. The two episodes are collected together through the common name of Pashhur rather than because they necessarily follow each other chronologically in Jeremiah's public acts.

Pashhur and Zephaniah ask Jeremiah to inquire of the Lord and to intercede for the nation. This is something that King Zedekiah would seek from Jeremiah on more than one occasion (37:3; 38:14). The Lord's reply is full of the judgmental language seen in virtually every previous chapter. What is new (for those reading through Jeremiah) is a specific reference to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and the specifics of the siege of Jerusalem. Babylon itself is mentioned specifically for the first time only in the previous chapter (20:4–6). Elsewhere the agent of judgment to come was merely described as the foe or enemy from the north.

According to the divine oracle, God will not war against the Babylonian army but against Judah for its faithlessness and wickedness. Yes, God is a valiant warrior, but the enemy at the moment is Judah, not Babylon! The fall of the city, therefore, is certain. God's resolve to judge the city is described in Hebrew as "the setting of his face," an idiom for single-minded

determination (21:10). The NIV paraphrases accurately with its rendering of God's "determination" to judge the city.

Jeremiah mediates part of God's reply to the state officials in language reminiscent of Deuteronomy 30:11–20. In Deuteronomy Moses set before the people "life and prosperity" or "death and destruction." Jeremiah spoke similarly in a previous context with reference to curse or blessing as part of the "two-way" formulation of wisdom theology (Jer. 17:5–13). Now Jeremiah tells the people that God is setting before them the way of life and death (21:8–9). Death is the fate of those who stay in the city; those who leave and are taken captive by the Babylonians will escape with their lives. Ominously, there is no call for repentance in the text of the divine oracle. God is on the side of the Babylonians for the historical moment, and the best that can be done for the Judeans is to convince them to capitulate to the Babylonians and thereby save their lives. There is specific reference to the destruction of Jerusalem by fire.

Bridging Contexts

Two ways. The allusion in 21:9 to the covenant proclamation of Deuteronomy 30:19—"I have set before you life and death"—helps modern readers set the announcement of Jerusalem's doom in a broader biblical context. The inhabitants of Jerusalem have a choice of "ways" set before them. Thus, the terrible announcement of doom is placed in the context of covenantal faith with its requirement of obedience and its acknowledgment that judgment will come on the disobedient. In this hour of crisis, Judah is reminded by a prophet like Moses that it is not the only generation of God's people to face hard choices or to see the bitter fruit of wrong decisions.

The New Testament picks up on this pattern of the two ways. Jesus' admonition about the way of life and the way of destruction (Matt. 7:13–14) follows the pattern exactly. It was even delivered at a time and place that reminds us of Moses—at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, delivered by the new and greater Moses. A bridge between then and now can be built on the typological correspondence of God's people from generation to generation; for in every generation there is the call to exercise obedience to the Lord, who brought it into existence. Each generation, as with each believer, ought to embark on the right way and avoid the wrong path.

God as warrior. The language of God as warrior in Jer. 21:5–6 also evokes in hearers a broader biblical context. In defeating Pharaoh and subsequently the Canaanites in the Promised Land, God revealed himself as a warrior on behalf of his people—a God who is "mighty to save," according to the great confession of Zephaniah 3:17.² There is, however, no partiality with God in judging iniquity. God can enter the fight against his own people, employing the Babylonians and their mighty king in the historical process to effect temporal judgment.

Contemporary Significance

THE WAY THAT LEADS TO LIFE. Christians may see in Jeremiah's hard words here an example of the "razor edge" of biblical theism. God fights against the powers of evil and corruption—and as with every fight, the results are not pretty. God will fight the powers of evil when they oppress his people, but God can also use the powers of evil in this world to judge his people. God is not indifferent to the sins of his people.

It is a remarkable word, therefore, that in the midst of hard words about Judah's doom the prophet in God's name sets forth a way of life and a way of death. In spite of the harsh language, annihilation of his people is not God's goal no matter how much it appears to be a necessary option. Historical judgment can be combined with the saving of a remnant, and they can become the seeds of renewal and hope. What is spoken here to the inhabitants is repeated in Jer. 38:2. It is spoken again to Jeremiah and to Baruch (38:19; 45:5)—two people who would witness divine judgment, but also two people whose work would spawn spiritual renewal among the survivors of the Babylonian onslaught.

The book of Jeremiah and the ongoing faith of the exilic communities are the evidence that these two were successful. By God's grace they found that the way to life came as a gift. In a paradox known to the faithful, the way to life is found in the giving over of one's life to the Lord. The way to life is a gift of God whose timing cannot be forced. It is often found only after several alternate routes have proved incorrect. Such is the life of faith! There is a sense in which the whole book of Jeremiah is a long commentary on the way of life and the way of death.

Wherever there is judgment and tragedy among God's people, there will also be signs of hope for those with eyes to see and ears to hear. How hard it can be to hear what the Spirit is saying in the midst of peril. The church cannot depend on its own resources but finally must implore the Lord to open their hearts in time to the way that leads to life.

Jeremiah 21:11–22:30

MOREOVER, SAY TO the royal house of Judah, 'Hear the word of the LORD; ¹²O house of David, this is what the LORD says:

"Administer justice every morning; rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed. or my wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done burn with no one to quench it. ¹³I am against you, Jerusalem, vou who live above this valley on the rocky plateau, declares the LORD you who say, "Who can come against us? Who can enter our refuge?" ¹⁴I will punish you as your deeds deserve, declares the LORD. I will kindle a fire in your forests that will consume everything around you."

^{22:1}This is what the LORD says: "Go down to the palace of the king of Judah and proclaim this message there: ²'Hear the word of the LORD, O king of Judah, you who sit on David's throne—you, your officials and your people who come through these gates. ³This is what the LORD says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place. ⁴For if you are careful to carry out these commands,

then kings who sit on David's throne will come through the gates of this palace, riding in chariots and on horses, accompanied by their officials and their people. ⁵But if you do not obey these commands, declares the LORD, I swear by myself that this palace will become a ruin."

⁶For this is what the LORD says about the palace of the king of Judah:

"Though you are like Gilead to me, like the summit of Lebanon,
I will surely make you like a desert, like towns not inhabited.

To will send destroyers against you, each man with his weapons, and they will cut up your fine cedar beams and throw them into the fire.

8"People from many nations will pass by this city and will ask one another, 'Why has the LORD done such a thing to this great city?' 9And the answer will be: 'Because they have forsaken the covenant of the LORD their God and have worshiped and served other gods.'"

10Do not weep for the dead king or mourn his loss;
rather, weep bitterly for him who is exiled,
because he will never return nor see his native land again.

¹¹For this is what the LORD says about Shallum son of Josiah, who succeeded his father as king of Judah but has gone from this place: "He will never return. ¹²He will die in the place where they have led him captive; he will not see this land again."

13"Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his countrymen work for nothing, not paying them for their labor.
14He says, 'I will build myself a great palace with spacious upper rooms.'
So he makes large windows in it, panels it with cedar and decorates it in red.

15"Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar?
Did not your father have food and drink? He did what was right and just, so all went well with him.
16He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well.
Is that not what it means to know me?" declares the LORD.
17"But your eyes and your heart are set only on dishonest gain, on shedding innocent blood and on oppression and extortion."

¹⁸Therefore this is what the LORD says about Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah:

"They will not mourn for him:
 'Alas, my brother! Alas, my sister!'
They will not mourn for him:
 'Alas, my master! Alas, his splendor!'

19 He will have the burial of a donkey—
 dragged away and thrown
 outside the gates of Jerusalem."

²⁰"Go up to Lebanon and cry out, let your voice be heard in Bashan, cry out from Abarim, for all your allies are crushed. ²¹I warned vou when you felt secure, but you said, 'I will not listen!' This has been your way from your youth; you have not obeyed me. ²²The wind will drive all your shepherds away, and your allies will go into exile. Then you will be ashamed and disgraced because of all your wickedness. ²³You who live in 'Lebanon,' who are nestled in cedar buildings, how you will groan when pangs come upon you, pain like that of a woman in labor!

²⁴"As surely as I live," declares the LORD, "even if you, Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim king of Judah, were a signet ring on my right hand, I would still pull you off. ²⁵I will hand you over to those who seek your life, those you fear—to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and to the Babylonians. ²⁶I will hurl you and the mother who gave you birth into another country, where neither of you was born, and there you both will die. ²⁷You will never come back to the land you long to return to."

²⁸Is this man Jehoiachin a despised, broken pot, an object no one wants?
Why will he and his children be hurled out, cast into a land they do not know?
²⁹O land, land, land,

hear the word of the LORD!

30 This is what the LORD says:

"Record this man as if childless,
 a man who will not prosper in his
 lifetime,
for none of his offspring will prosper,
 none will sit on the throne of David
 or rule anymore in Judah."

Original Meaning

THIS SECTION OF JEREMIAH contains several oracles directed to (against!) the royal family and its administration of affairs in Jerusalem. These prophecies are collected together because they share a common topic, not because they come from the same period in Jeremiah's ministry. Both the dynasty of David itself (21:12; 22:1, 6) and three of its kings are addressed (22:10–30): Shallum (also known as Jehoahaz), Jehoiakim, and Jehoiachin ("Coniah" in the Heb. of 22:24, 28). Josiah, the father of Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim as well as the grandfather of Jehoiachin, is referred to by way of contrast in 22:15–16. With the mention of Zedekiah⁴ in 21:1, readers have contextual references to all the kings of Judah who reigned during Jeremiah's ministry.

In the critical evaluation of the kings in this section, readers encounter an emphasis on royal social responsibilities. The king and his administration should "administer justice" (21:12) and "do what is just and right" (22:3). The Hebrew words for "just/justice" (*mišpaṭ*) and "right" (*ṣedaqa*) are recognized terms to describe social rectitude and a healthy communal life. They overlap much in their meaning and often occur together as a word pair in the Old Testament.

These two terms are derived from a social vision where institutions such as the monarchy and court system are responsible to curb oppression and to protect the more vulnerable members of society. Justice is primarily associated with administration. In doing justice one works through social institutions (e.g., court, state agencies). Righteousness is more a relational term. One is considered righteous when acting faithfully toward those with whom one is related in community. A monarchy and its administrative agents who do not act in accord with these standards face judgment in the

historical process (21:12; 22:4–9). The failures of the royal administration are also attributed to rejection of the covenant with God and the worship of other deities (22:9).

21:11–14. These verses can be read as further commentary on Jeremiah's word to Zedekiah in 21:1–10. The NIV translation of verse 11, which begins with "moreover," implies this connection. The grammar and syntax of the verse do not require this translation, however, and the four verses in this section are more like the general assessment of the monarchy in 22:1–9, the next oracle in the section. This suggests that they are meant for any and all members of the house of David who live in the palace and assist in carrying out the affairs of state. In verse 13 comes a bitter criticism of those who live above the valley floors that surround Jerusalem. These persons would be royalty and other influential inhabitants who can afford the safer location of height in times of siege.

The command in Jer. 21:12 to "administer justice every morning" and to "rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one ... robbed" has a close parallel in Micah's critique preserved in Micah 2:1–2. Micah was from the Judean countryside, and his second chapter is a devastating critique of oppression that stems from Jerusalem. Early morning was the time when people in towns and villages rose and met one another on their way to perform daily tasks. When they met at the gate of the city or village, they also worked out administrative-judicial affairs and witnessed agreements. Micah complains about those who rise early and seize property because they have the "power" ('el; lit., God) in their hand. Jeremiah's charge to the royal house, therefore, is to be a court of appeal for the oppressed "every morning."

22:1–9. God commands the prophet to "go down to the palace of the king" to proclaim a message. Readers should not overlook the verb "go down." Since the palace of the king is located at one of the highest points of Jerusalem, about the only place from which Jeremiah can "go down" is from the temple mount. This incidental comment tells us much about one important place where Jeremiah receives his prompting from God. Readers learn from another incidental comment in verse 2 that the royal palace had gates. Since some matters of state and cult were carried out at the royal palace (likely located near the temple), the gates would be those entry points to a public courtyard or hall.

Monarchs and their servants should prevent the shedding of "innocent blood in this place" (22:3). The prophet offered a similar charge in his temple sermon (7:6; cf. 19:4), and it is a topic to which he comes again in the context of a critique of royalty (22:17). This is a foreboding topic since "innocent blood" required atonement and other ceremonies to deal with its expiation; otherwise, responsibility for the shedding of innocent blood fell on the whole community. Part of the duty of the royal house in doing justice and righteousness was to vindicate an innocent victim and to punish the murderers, even if the latter were from the elite strata of society.

Something of the "two-way" preaching is preserved in 22:4–5. In essence, the two ways set before the royal house are the same as those set before the people.

22:10–12. Of the three kings addressed directly, the briefest prophecy concerns Shallum, that is, Jehoahaz, the son and immediate successor to Josiah. He was placed on the throne after the death of his father but was subsequently removed by the Egyptian pharaoh after a brief reign. Jeremiah calls for bitter weeping (mourning) on his behalf, although his personal evaluation of Jehoahaz is not clear (cf. 2 Kings 23:32). The fate of this king foreshadows that of the people. The call in Jeremiah 22:10 not to mourn the death of Josiah is intended only to call attention to the sad fate of Jehoahaz. According to 2 Chronicles 35:25, Jeremiah offered a lamentation for Josiah, which became a pattern for singers in Israel.

22:13–23. Jeremiah pronounces a judgmental "woe" on Jehoiakim, the older brother of Jehoahaz, who succeeded his younger brother on the throne (23:13–23). Apparently the people of the land (Judean property owners?) recognized Jehoiakim's unsuitability for rule when they initially bypassed him for Jehoahaz. They were loyal to the dynasty of David but did not want the eldest son to follow Josiah. The Egyptians, however, placed Jehoiakim on the throne, perhaps for the same reason that the people of the land had passed him over. Most certainly the Egyptians wanted someone from the royal family whom they could control. The Judeans would have preferred someone of a more independent nature.

Verse 13 describes Jehoiakim's activities as "unrighteous" and as examples of "injustice." These terms, of course, are the negative counterparts to justice and righteousness (cf. 22:3). Jehoiakim's arrogant building project is described as "his palace." Almost certainly this is not a

primary residence, since the royal palace in Jerusalem had been in existence as long as the temple. According to 36:22 Jehoiakim had a winter house. Whether this is the house that Jeremiah describes in 22:13–14 cannot be known without further information.

By contrast with Jehoiakim, his father Josiah is described as one who lived the life of a king (he ate and drank), but who also did what was "right and just" (*ṣedaqa* and *mišpaṭ*, v. 15), defending the cause of the poor and needy. Jeremiah describes this activity as an example of what it means to "know" the Lord. Josiah is the only one of the monarchs from his day whom Jeremiah praises.

The fate of the arrogant and selfish king is that he will not be mourned at his death and will not receive a proper burial. Extant sources do not give details of Jehoiakim's burial or the precise circumstances of his death. The latter came apparently during the time of the Babylonians' siege of Jerusalem in 598/597 B.C.

22:24–30. This address to Jehoiachin has several grammatical complexities. The gist of the message is that he too falls under the judgment of the historical hour. His personal failings are not listed, and it may be that the query in verse 28 recognizes the incongruence of his circumstances. More precisely he and his family will go into Babylonian exile, and the young king will be reckoned as childless—although he has descendants—since his sons¹¹ will not sit on the throne of David and rule as kings in Judah.

Bridging Contexts

JUSTICE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS. This criticism of the Davidic dynasty and the enumeration of social crimes is but a part of a larger biblical concern to advocate justice and to oppose injustice. Several of the prophets before and during Jeremiah's day announced judgment on their contemporaries because of injustice and oppression. Amos, for example, castigated Israel for failing to uphold God's standards of justice and righteousness (Amos 5:7, 14–15, 21–24; 6:12). Leading citizens of Samaria oppressed weaker members of society (4:1; cf. 2:7–8), and a destructive greed was rampant (8:4–6). Amos declared God's judgment on Israel; subsequently the nation was overrun by the Assyrians, Samaria was destroyed, and many

inhabitants were taken into exile.¹³ As noted above, Micah's social criticism of Judah has several things in common with Jeremiah. In his attitude toward the responsibilities of the royal house and their servants, Jeremiah stands in good prophetic company.

As with the other prophets, Jeremiah was not a political reformer in the modern sense of that term. His many harsh words of denunciation are not followed by a detailed blueprint for social reforms. There are at least three reasons for this. (1) Jeremiah was not a social architect or theorist; he was a prophet who spoke under the conviction that he lived in the historical hour of judgment.

- (2) There is no indication that Jeremiah believed a new political philosophy or platform should be put in place. His terminology of justice and righteousness comes directly from the normative traditions of Israel. It was not a new plan that needed implementation but the application of covenant ethics as known in the Sinai revelation or in the claim of prerogative for David's family as guardian of the social order (Ps. 72).
- (3) Jeremiah came to believe that Judah would be unable on its own to reconstitute itself as a just and compassionate society simply by changing a few programs. His preaching of repentance (where it is preserved in the book) seems to have convinced him that only God could reform Judah, which in turn would require a complete transformation of the people. Nor did Jeremiah have a secular ideal on which to draw for his concerns, since the "old paths" sufficed for instruction (Jer. 6:16), but he did not concentrate on the "old paths" of the covenant ethics known to him. His work was essentially a theological critique, based on God's revealed character as righteous and just and shaped by the conviction that historical judgment was irrevocable.

The New Testament also voices concerns for justice and righteousness in the church. Since the tiny church of the apostolic age had no privilege in society or institutional political influence, the emphasis of the New Testament letters is on the internal ethics of the Christian community. Nevertheless, the various writers there concur that both the church body and its leaders should reflect a gospel-oriented holiness in its administrative structures and in the witness of the church's common life.¹⁴

As part of his criticism of Jehoiakim, Jeremiah also recognizes that a king can be a king with all the trappings and symbolism of the office and yet reflect the required covenantal ethics. Josiah ate and drank, but he also did justice and righteousness. Jeremiah's assessment is not unlike that given in 2 Kings, where the ruler is described as one who turned to the Lord with all his heart (2 Kings 23:25). The prophet asks rhetorically if such activity is what it means to "know God" (Jer. 22:16). The answer, of course, is "yes!" Here is an intertextual echo with 9:23–24. The wise person is one who knows the Lord as the God who exercises loving-kindness, justice, and righteousness and the God who delights when others do these things. What God wants from the Davidic rulers or from any truly "wise" person is someone who knows him and who shares his delight in these attributes.

Jeremiah's prophecies concerning the royal house and its administration underscore the importance of leadership for God's people. As 1 and 2 Kings make clear, as the leadership of the people goes, so go the people. This is an important bridge between then and now. With great privilege comes great responsibility. In Judah there was no "separation of church and state," as is common in modern Western societies. Kings were responsible to use their position of influence as servants of the Lord. Christians today may hear these words and be instructed first that the church (the current generation of God's people) has responsibilities to nurture and to support those among us who are weak and mistreated. Moreover, it is incumbent particularly on the leadership to demonstrate this concern and encourage it among the people.

Christians today may also hear these words as a call to support humanitarian policies and those institutions in their society that are concerned with justice and righteousness. In this way God, the Lord of all creation, is honored, and his gifts of common grace for all peoples are acknowledged by his people.

The royal line. The sad words about Jehoiachin are a somber commentary that comes in the context of judgment on Judah as a whole. These words, however, should be heard in the larger biblical context of additional revelation about his family. Jehoiachin and his family represent the generation judged and sent into exile. The Babylonians cut short his brief reign as king, and he spent the rest of his life in Babylon. Since the monarchical rule of the Davidic house ceased with the destruction of Jerusalem, none of Jehoiachin's sons ever sat on the throne so briefly occupied by him. Nevertheless, the fact that Jehoiachin survived in captivity is recorded as a sign of hope (2 Kings 25:27–30; Jer. 52:31–34).

Moreover, his grandson Zerubbabel was appointed governor of the early postexilic community in Jerusalem (Hag. 1:1; Ezra 3:1–13).

Jehoiachin is part of the Davidic line that continues through Zerubbabel and leads to the birth of Christ (Matt. 1:1-17). When Zerubbabel is addressed by the prophet Haggai, he is told that he is a servant and a signet ring to the Lord (Hag. 2:20–23). This oracle likely reflects the judgmental against his grandfather in Jeremiah 22:24 prophecy ("if ... Jehoiachin ... were a signet ring ...") and shows, furthermore, that the historical word of judgment can be set in a larger framework of God's transhistorical intent to preserve and transform his people through the promises made to the Davidic house. Christians should see in these details the unfolding drama of the royal office into which Christ was born ("as to his human nature ... a descendant of David," Rom. 1:3). The great promises to and failures of the royal office provide the background to Jesus' fulfillment of it as the resurrected head of the church.¹⁵

Contemporary Significance

MORAL COMMITMENTS. A maxim among modern Christians is that "truth is first in order to goodness." The truth of who God is and the truth of what God has called the church to be entail a commitment to moral character and social ethics in the church. Moral commitments start with its leadership.

Three kings in Jeremiah's time (Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin) are addressed as failures and as examples of the corporate failure of Judah. The flip side of a commitment to moral character and social rectitude is the disintegration of communal life when these qualities are absent. As the kings failed, so failed Judah. In current North American society, one can cite any number of statistics and trends that do not bode well for communal life (e.g., crime, family disintegration, etc.). Will they lead to a larger collapse of society? If so, are the churches immune from the fallout?

One should be careful in comparing the political leadership of a modern Western nation with the fate of Judah's leadership during Jeremiah's day. The president of the United States, for example, does not stand in the line of Davidic kings, nor is the president elected the head of the people of God (= the church). Christians may well argue the link between moral values and the health of a nation, but the first application of God's Word to ancient

Judah concerning justice and righteousness is to the current generation of God's people.

Knowing God. The harsh word to Jehoiakim also contains an affirmation of what it means to know God. In his case, the contrast with his father, Josiah, is telling. The test of knowing God is the commitment of the person to the things of God—justice and righteousness for God's people. "If you love me," said Jesus, "you will obey what I command" (John 14:15). To know God is to be committed to his revealed will in the places of responsibility (ministry) where one lives and works. Of course, to know God means also to be rightly and personally related to him.

The affirmation that Josiah "turned to the LORD with all his heart and with all his soul" (2 Kings 23:25) is testimony to this truth, but Jeremiah's particular word relates to the practice of one's faith. Such an emphasis can be easily avoided by Christians claiming a cheap grace, but its truth cannot be evaded indefinitely. An orthodox theology leads to orthopraxis. Truth is first in order to goodness, not for self-justification but as service to the Lord.

God's faithfulness. The harsh words about Jehoiachin are a lesson about judgment and providence and a profound illustration of the "ups and downs" of the royal office ultimately fulfilled in Christ. As a young man and king for only three months, Jehoiachin was swept away into exile in 597. He spent the rest of his life in exile. He embodied the fate of his people. There was no escape from responsibility for failure. God's word of judgment to him in the historical hour came in service to God's larger intent to use the judgment of exile to chasten and redeem his people. God had bound himself by covenant oath to David's family as ruler over his people (2 Sam. 7; 23:5). Jehoiachin would see the discipline that God hands out to recalcitrant children (Jer. 7:12–16), and his own sons were included.

Nevertheless, God would remain true to his promise and through Jehoiachin's line would again raise up leaders for his people. His grandson Zerubbabel would play a crucial role in the early postexilic period, serving as governor in Jerusalem. From this family of many failures came the ultimate child of promise, Christ the Lord (Matt. 1:1–17). God's historical "no" to the sins of Jehoiachin and his generation was tempered by his great "yes" in Jesus Christ. In his wrath God had marked Jehoiachin down as childless—none of his sons would ever sit on the throne; nevertheless, one

of his descendants has ascended the throne of rule over God's people in a far grander way than Jehoiachin would ever realize.

The word of judgment to Jehoiachin is a sobering prophecy. There are situations where historical ruin comes about or where one's hopes are never realized. His uncle Jehoahaz died in Egypt, he in Babylon. Christ, his descendant according to the flesh, died on the cross. But he was raised to new life, and Christ now demonstrates God's resolve to save that which is lost. As the Lord of the church, Christ rules now as King of kings and Lord of lords.

Jeremiah 23:1–40

WOE TO THE SHEPHERDS who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!" declares the LORD. ²Therefore this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: "Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done," declares the LORD. ³"I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. ⁴I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing," declares the LORD.

5"The days are coming," declares the LORD,
"when I will roise up to David a

"when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch,

a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land.

⁶In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety.
This is the name by which he will be called:
The LORD Our Righteousness.

⁷"So then, the days are coming," declares the LORD, "when people will no longer say, 'As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt,' ⁸but they will say, 'As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the descendants of Israel up out of the land of the north and out of all the countries

where he had banished them.' Then they will live in their own land."

⁹Concerning the prophets:

My heart is broken within me; all my bones tremble.

I am like a drunken man, like a man overcome by wine, because of the LORD and his holy words.

10 The land is full of adulterers; because of the curse the land lies parched and the pastures in the desert are withered.

The prophets follow an evil course and use their power unjustly.

11"Both prophet and priest are godless; even in my temple I find their wickedness,"

declares the LORD.

12"Therefore their path will become slippery; they will be banished to darkness and there they will fall.

I will bring disaster on them in the year they are punished," declares the LORD.

13"Among the prophets of Samaria
I saw this repulsive thing:
They prophesied by Baal
and led my people Israel astray.
14And among the prophets of Jerusalem
I have seen something horrible:
They commit adultery and live a lie.

They strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from his wickedness.

They are all like Sodom to me; the people of Jerusalem are like Gomorrah."

¹⁵Therefore, this is what the LORD Almighty says concerning the prophets:

"I will make them eat bitter food and drink poisoned water, because from the prophets of Jerusalem ungodliness has spread throughout the land."

¹⁶This is what the LORD Almighty says:

"Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes.

They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD.

¹⁷They keep saying to those who despise me,

'The LORD says: You will have peace.'

And to all who follow the stubbornness of their hearts

they say, 'No harm will come to you.'

18But which of them has stood in the council of the LORD to see or to hear his word?Who has listened and heard his word?

¹⁹See, the storm of the LORD will burst out in wrath, a whirlwind swirling down

on the heads of the wicked. ²⁰The anger of the LORD will not turn back until he fully accomplishes the purposes of his heart. In days to come you will understand it clearly. ²¹I did not send these prophets, vet they have run with their message; I did not speak to them, yet they have prophesied. ²²But if they had stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my words to my people and would have turned them from their evil ways and from their evil deeds.

23"Am I only a God nearby,"
declares the LORD,
"and not a God far away?

24Can anyone hide in secret places
so that I cannot see him?"
declares the LORD.
"Do not I fill heaven and earth?"
declares the LORD.

²⁵"I have heard what the prophets say who prophesy lies in my name. They say, 'I had a dream! I had a dream!' ²⁶How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the delusions of their own minds? ²⁷They think the dreams they tell one another will make my people forget my name, just as their fathers forgot my name through Baal worship. ²⁸Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to

do with grain?" declares the LORD. ²⁹"Is not my word like fire," declares the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?

³⁰"Therefore," declares the LORD, "I am against the prophets who steal from one another words supposedly from me. ³¹Yes," declares the LORD, "I am against the prophets who wag their own tongues and yet declare, 'The LORD declares.' ³²Indeed, I am against those who prophesy false dreams," declares the LORD. "They tell them and lead my people astray with their reckless lies, yet I did not send or appoint them. They do not benefit these people in the least," declares the LORD.

33"When these people, or a prophet or a priest, ask you, 'What is the oracle of the LORD?' say to them, 'What oracle? I will forsake you, declares the LORD.' ³⁴If a prophet or a priest or anyone else claims, 'This is the oracle of the LORD,' I will punish that man and his household. ³⁵This is what each of you keeps on saying to his friend or relative: 'What is the LORD's answer?' or 'What has the LORD spoken?' ³⁶But you must not mention 'the oracle of the LORD' again, because every man's own word becomes his oracle and so you distort the words of the living God, the LORD Almighty, our God. ³⁷This is what you keep saying to a prophet: 'What is the LORD's answer to you?' or 'What has the LORD spoken?' ³⁸Although you claim, 'This is the oracle of the LORD,' this is what the LORD says: You used the words, 'This is the oracle of the LORD,' even though I told you that you must not claim, 'This is the oracle of the LORD.' ³⁹Therefore, I will surely forget you and cast you out of my presence along with the city I gave to you and your fathers. ⁴⁰I will bring upon you everlasting disgrace —everlasting shame that will not be forgotten."

Original Meaning

JEREMIAH 23 COLLECTS a number of harsh sayings against the religious leaders who oppose Jeremiah in word and deed. As is common in the first half of the book, there are no dates associated with these prophecies. Included among the "shepherds" mentioned at the beginning of the chapter are almost certainly kings—perhaps the three kings (Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah) mentioned in the previous two chapters. Priests are also mentioned (23:11, 33–34), but the brunt of the criticism falls on prophets, who have not understood the Lord correctly and who have, therefore, misled the people (cf. Deut. 13; 18). Among these words of judgment are also claims that God intends to redeem his scattered people and to raise up a shepherd in whose days Judah and Israel will find security.

- 23:1–4. Punishment and crime are linked for the shepherds in this brief prose text. God will bring judgment on them because they have not cared for their flock. Verse 2 charges them more specifically with not caring for "my [i.e. God's] people." The scattered flock is identified as the exiled remnant of God's people, who will be brought back to their homeland (23:3, 7–8). This passage, therefore, probably originated after the first wave of exiles was taken away to Babylon in 597 B.C. Since the fall and destruction of Jerusalem are not mentioned, it is less likely that the prophecy originated after 587/586 B.C.
- 23:5–6. This passage begins with a typical formula about the future: "The days are coming." God will raise up for his scattered people a shepherd who will rule justly and wisely.² He will be a king from David's line. His wonderful name, "The LORD Our Righteousness" (yhwh sideqenu), is a pun on the name Zedekiah (= Righteous is Yahweh), the last king of Judah (who reigned from 597–587/586 B.C.). For the generation of Jeremiah, the symbolic name of this "righteous Branch" is probably a sarcastic judgment on Zedekiah; moreover, it points to God's resolve to restore his people and fulfill his promises to the Davidic line.

This prophecy, like the prose text that begins chapter 23, should be read in the context of the previous section (21:11–22:30) and its concern with the injustice and failures of the Davidic monarchs. The judgment to fall on the shepherds comes because they have failed to fulfill the duties of their office. As verse 5 proclaims, a king should "do what is just [mišpaṭ] and right

[sedaqa] in the land." These are the normative terms, the expected attributes of kingship (see 22:15; also Ps. 72:1–4).

The name of the king ("The LORD Our Righteousness") represents significant claims about the work of God. (1) In his days Judah and Israel "will be saved" and will dwell securely. (2) The righteousness indicated in his name is for the people, even though it is not fully their own. The Lord is their righteousness. It is the integrity of the Lord, his fidelity to his promises, that is finally the people's righteousness.

23:7–8. Prophecy of a future change in the circumstances of the people continues in these two verses (see also 16:14–15). Just as something new and wonderful will emerge from David's line, so a second exodus will occur, and the exiled people will return to their land.

The criticisms of the prophets who are misleading the people are manifold. The rest of the chapter concerns their culpability in failing their office and the people. These prophecies come as part of an exchange between Jeremiah and God. The voices can be outlined as follows:

- A. 23:9–10: Jeremiah laments the evil course of his prophetic opponents.
- B. 23:11–12: God speaks of the wickedness he sees and announces judgment.
- C. 23:13–14: Jeremiah refers to prophets in Samaria and Jerusalem as repulsive.
- D. 23:15–24: God denies that he has sent these misleading prophets and affirms that nothing they do is secret to him.
- E. 23:25–40: In this prose section Jeremiah reports God's anger at the false dreams and oracles offered in his name.
- 23:9–10. Perhaps the first clause of verse 9 is a heading for the materials that follow and not just for Jeremiah's anguished comments in verses 9–10. Jeremiah reacts to the dire straits of his people and the power of his prophetic opponents to mislead them. He mentions drought conditions as one element of his horror (cf. ch. 14). The magnitude of God's words of judgment have rendered the prophet like a drunken man. It is not clear whether this is metaphorical language to describe Jeremiah's strong

emotional reaction or if he actually manifests physical symptoms ("all my bones tremble").

23:11–12. God's first reply notes that the wickedness of prophet and priest is in "my temple" (lit., "my house"). These verses confirm that the prophets and priests who serve there are also offering oracles of assurance that the nation will not fall.

23:13–14. Jeremiah reports a repulsive thing he has observed about the earlier prophets of Samaria (the northern kingdom): They prophesied by Baal and led God's people astray (cf. 23:27). This historical comment interprets the fall of Israel and Samaria in 722/721 B.C. Something equally heinous is then reported with respect to the prophets in Jerusalem: They are adulterers and living a lie. These observations can be attributed either to God or to Jeremiah, but the introductory formula of verse 15—"Therefore, this is what the LORD Almighty says"—implies that Jeremiah is the speaker in verses 13–14 and that the divine oracle in verses 15–24 is God's response. Verse 14 offers a familiar analogy to describe the folly of Samaria and Jerusalem; the two cities are compared to Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities on the plain that God overthrew because of their wickedness (Gen. 18:16–19:29).

23:15–24. The introductory formula of verse 15 is like that of verse 9. Concerning the prophets, it seems to introduce several oracles from the Lord. There are additional rhetorical formulae in verses 16, 23, and 24. The command "do not listen to … the prophets" is addressed to the people. The prophets who prophesy "peace" is a familiar complaint in Jeremiah. There will be no peace or security for a people who "despise" God.

The oracle about judgment on the prophets notes that the people will better understand this matter in "days to come" (v. 20). It is the function of a book like Jeremiah, which was published in the aftermath of Judah's demise, to make clear that the people had trusted in lies.

God denies sending these prophets. The rhetorical question of verse 18—"Which of [the prophets] has stood in the council of the LORD?"—implies an emphatic negative for an answer. None of them has been privy to God's council.⁵ If they had been in God's council, then they would have proclaimed the evil deeds of the people and attempted to turn them from their acts and the consequences.

The rhetorical questions of verses 23–24 are also intended for the people's hearing. Whether near or far, the people and their deeds are known to God, who fills heaven and earth (with his presence).

23:25–40. These prose comments continue the criticism of Jerusalem's prophets. One of their modes of communicating is dream reports. Verse 28 makes a distinction between the faithful reporting of God's word and the reporting of a dream. The implication is that the reception of the word is a different form of experience, but it is not further defined. In effect, it is like the hammer that shatters rock.

Verses 33–40 begin with a play on one of the words for "oracle" (mas's'a'), which can also be translated as "burden" (cf. NIV note). Perhaps the link between the two meanings of the word comes from the concept of bearing or carrying something. The Greek translation of verse 33 reflects a different Hebrew text from the Masoretic Text. The question implied by the LXX reads: "What is the mas's'a' [oracle] of the LORD?" and it is answered by a statement directed to the people, "You are the mas's'a' [the burden]." The gist of these last verses is clear, however the wordplay is sorted out: God will judge the prophets and the people who listen to them.

It is important to note that in all the criticism of the prophets, the expression "false prophet" is not used. Some of these prophets probably deserved the description, for they looked to Baal for their inspiration or simply lied about their reception of a message from Yahweh. Some, however, might not deserve such a description. Perhaps they had been of service in the cause of the Lord in times past, and they sincerely hoped that their message of peace and security had its origin with the Lord.

These judgments against the religious leaders of the people are related to other passages in Jeremiah. Various narratives and oracles make it clear that Jehoiakim and Zedekiah failed as shepherds of the nation. That some members of the priesthood were hostile to Jeremiah is clear from 20:1–6. Jeremiah will have a memorable encounter with a prophet named Hananiah in chapter 28, and he will be involved (via letters) in debate with Judean prophets in Babylon (29:21–32). His prayers of lament are derived, in part, from his experiences of ridicule and humiliation at the hand of these leaders.

Bridging Contexts

FALSE PROPHETS. The covenant-renewal document known as Deuteronomy has stipulations that parallel Jeremiah's criticisms of religious leaders and provide a broader biblical context in which to interpret the prophet's critique. One may point to the first two commandments of the Decalogue (Deut. 5:7–10), which forbid the worship of other deities. In elaboration, Deuteronomy 13 and 18 warn the people to avoid prophets who advocate the worship of other deities. They offer warnings about prophets and dreamers who will lead Israel astray. The penalty for such prophetic activity is death. Jeremiah's harsh words about the religious leaders apparently have their roots in this broader biblical context of a judicial judgment on "false prophets" for inciting a rebellion or turning people away from the Lord. Similarly, Jesus judges "false prophets" harshly because of the damage they do (Matt. 7:15–23).

Deuteronomy 17:14–20 requires that the king in Israel have a copy of the covenant law and that he live by its precepts. The integrity required of the ruler is missing among the indicted shepherds, whose lack of justice and righteousness and whose failure to cling to the Lord have resulted in the scattering of the Lord's flock.

Shepherding motif. The language of shepherd and shepherding is a part of the broader biblical theme of the character of leadership in Israel, taken from the cultural role of a shepherd who tends his flocks by providing sustenance and protection from harm. Israel offers praise to God, who is the ultimate Shepherd of his people (Ps. 23:1; 80:1). Ezekiel likewise uses the specific imagery of the shepherd for a ruler in his criticism of Judean leaders (Ezek. 34). Nathan, David's prophetic advisor, received a prophetic revelation to remind David that he was anointed to shepherd God's people (2 Sam. 7:7). Here is foundational material for the Davidic covenant and the royal office ultimately filled by Christ. In the New Testament Christ identifies himself as the "good shepherd" who lays down his life for the flock (John 10; cf. 1 Peter 2:25).

Jeremiah announces that God will raise up a faithful shepherd whose symbolic name indicates that the Lord is the people's righteousness. Christians recognize the truth of that prophecy in a way Jeremiah's contemporaries could not. Old Testament saints heard that prophecy as God's faithfulness to the Davidic line and his grace in saving a remnant of

his people. The name, of course, is symbolic of the character of the future ruler. In Christ God has demonstrated his righteousness and also accepted Christ's righteousness on behalf of those who trust in his saving work. Christ thus fulfills the Davidic hopes and represents them in a faithful, yet also grander, way than anticipated by Jeremiah's contemporaries. Christ is, as noted in the previous chapter, the culmination of the hopes of the royal office. Even the failures of a Zedekiah (or any failures in the line of David) simply set Christ's headship over the church in bold relief.

Contemporary Significance

LEADERSHIP OF GOD'S PEOPLE. Jeremiah's criticism of religious leaders touches on a sensitive and central biblical theme: that of the spiritual and moral character of leadership among God's people. The history of the church is replete with examples of good and bad leadership. Saints of the past such as Augustine, Martin Luther, and William Booth (founder of the Salvation Army) provided visionary leadership and a piety combining moral character and devotion to Christ. On the other side were Gnostics, syncretists, and libertines, who diluted the faith and argued that morals do not matter.

It is a sobering exercise for modern Christians to ask who among the church's leadership downplay the issues of moral character and soft-pedal the spiritual characteristics needed to shepherd God's people. Who among the spokespersons for the faith downplay the distinctive character of Christian faith in return for an emphasis on greater commonality with the world? What leaders say one thing and yet represent another in their personal lives? The point is not to advocate moralism at all costs but to look carefully for the consistency of the prophetic voice with the faith it defends in controversial times.

Jeremiah criticizes the prophets who proclaim that all is well when the corporate life of the people shows desperate problems. In some Christian circles it is relatively easy to paint a sordid picture of parts of human existence but more difficult to strike a balance between a negative assessment of human failure and a positive proclamation of God's ability to heal and to transform. Correspondingly, some Christian communities find it too easy to ignore problems within their midst, and they look with disfavor

on those who disturb the peace and purity of the church. Those who lead the church and claim to know the direction in which it should go have a great responsibility. "By their fruit you will recognize them," said Jesus (Matt. 7:16), a practical test that is consistent with Jeremiah's criticism of his prophetic contemporaries and a test that remains crucial in the present.

A true prophet. Jeremiah was a true prophet because the word he received from the Lord was vindicated in the events of history. Clearly, the timing of the fulfillment was a point of consternation for him. He spent years proclaiming a judgment that came only after much anguish on his part. That his word about the future eventually did occur is one of the tests for true prophecy (according to Deuteronomy). With the life of the people in crisis, Jeremiah announced that Judah had to change or judgment would come. Eventually he understood that any repentance would be too little and too late. Those prophets who disagreed with him were wrong historically and theologically. In essence, their denial of judgment was a denial of the Lord at work redemptively through historical judgment. Their words diverted the people's attention from seeking the Lord to a false assurance that he would protect them.

Is this not like the turmoil over Jesus' public ministry, where he continually called people to a life of commitment and spiritual discernment in counting the cost of discipleship? Discipleship (i.e., following Christ) is also a form of leadership, and vice versa. Christ came not to be served but to serve (Mark 10:45). That is the point of Christology; it is the point for all shepherds in the church.

Jeremiah 24:1–10

AFTER JEHOIACHIN son of Jehoiakim king of Judah and the officials, the craftsmen and the artisans of Judah were carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the LORD showed me two baskets of figs placed in front of the temple of the LORD. ²One basket had very good figs, like those that ripen early; the other basket had very poor figs, so bad they could not be eaten.

³Then the LORD asked me, "What do you see, Jeremiah?"

"Figs," I answered. "The good ones are very good, but the poor ones are so bad they cannot be eaten."

⁴Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁵"This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Like these good figs, I regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I sent away from this place to the land of the Babylonians. ⁶My eyes will watch over them for their good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up and not tear them down; I will plant them and not uproot them. ⁷I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart.

8""But like the poor figs, which are so bad they cannot be eaten,' says the LORD, 'so will I deal with Zedekiah king of Judah, his officials and the survivors from Jerusalem, whether they remain in this land or live in Egypt. 9I will make them abhorrent and an offense to all the kingdoms of the earth, a reproach and a byword, an object of ridicule and cursing, wherever I banish them. 10I will send the sword, famine and plague against them

until they are destroyed from the land I gave to them and their fathers."

Original Meaning

JEREMIAH'S OBSERVATIONS AT the temple become a vehicle for God's address to the people. The setting is in Zedekiah's reign, sometime between 597 B.C., when Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin and a number of the leading citizens of Judah into exile in Babylon, and 587/586, when the Babylonians besieged and destroyed Jerusalem. The date is probably close to 588, the beginning of the second Babylonian siege of Jerusalem.

Jeremiah observes two baskets of figs left as offerings at the temple, one of which contains ripe figs and the other rotten figs.² The Lord tells the prophet that the good figs are like the Judeans taken into exile, while the rotten figs represent Zedekiah and those who remain in Jerusalem and Judah. The Lord promises to do good to the exilic community, to bring them back from exile, and to give them a heart to know him. Concerning those remaining in Judah, however, the Lord promises judgment.

One finds in this autobiographic prophetic report a shorthand version of what the larger book of Jeremiah intends to accomplish. For those on whom the judgment of the Exile has fallen, God announces that he intends to "build them up" and to "plant" them again in the Promised Land.³ Return to the land is not all that God intends, although the return is a sign of something more fundamental, a wholehearted return to the Lord. Thus, there is also the promise of a heart prepared by God to know him as well as the reinstitution of the covenant relationship ("they will be my people, and I will be their God," 24:7).⁴ For those still mired in their failures, the announced judgments stand.

Bridging Contexts

REMNANT THEOLOGY. Not only does this chapter reflect in brief the larger designs of the book of Jeremiah, but its claims of judgment and restoration are also part of a larger biblical pattern of remnant theology. Judgment upon iniquity and sociopolitical changes (e.g., statehood and monarchy; exile) brought divisions among the people of God. During the period of Elijah, for

example, many in Israel fell to the seductions of the Phoenician culture and religion. God assured Elijah, however, that there were still seven thousand in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal (1 Kings 19:1–18).

With turmoil, intrigue, and injustice rampant, Isaiah was told not to believe what many of his contemporaries called conspiracy but to seal up his testimony among his disciples (Isa. 8:11–17). With his prophetic testimony and his disciples, Isaiah formed a remnant community in eighth-century Judah. In the postexilic community, Ezra and Nehemiah formed a remnant community centered in Jerusalem. Their opponents may have considered themselves part of God's people, but their actions disqualified them from membership.

In the New Testament, Jesus' choice of twelve disciples likely reflects a symbolic forming of a new Israel among the Jews of his day. The church of Jew and Gentile together is a fulfillment of the prophetic hope to raise up again the booth of David and to save remnants from among humankind (Acts 15:13–21). When Paul reflects on God's providence, he thinks of the church as a remnant saved by grace and as evidence that God's mercy will cast an even wider net (Rom. 11). A circular letter to Christians in dispersion interprets them typologically as an exiled remnant, who have been born anew to a living hope through Christ (1 Peter 1:1–9).

Christians, therefore, are part of the remnant saved by grace. This is one of the bridges linking Jeremiah's vision of the two baskets with the church. Another is typological and similar to the remnant link. In the return from exile God provides fulfillment of his concern for his people in Babylon. This does not exhaust the meaning of Jeremiah's prophecy, but it illumines the concern of God wherever and whenever his people are scattered and turn to him in faith.

Contemporary Significance

JUDGMENT AND RESTORATION. God is just in judgment and yet one who justifies (accepts as righteous) those who trust him for their salvation. This is a paraphrase of Romans 3:26; it also captures the intent of Jeremiah 24. God brings judgment on those who spurn him and reject his covenant. But he also seeks to save that which is lost and to give a new heart to those whom he calls into fellowship. The divided fate of the two communities in

Jeremiah's day illustrates God's use of the historical process for judgment and restoration.

The heart. Jeremiah depicts the matter of relating to God as a matter of the heart. The heart is the inner core of a person that directs the will and prompts action. This is somewhat different from the modern Western emphasis on the heart as the seat of feelings and emotions. God desires wholehearted allegiance, and by his grace he offers a new heart to his people. In its original context, the physical circumstances concern the judgment of the Exile and the future gift of return to the Promised Land. But there is more even in the original context. The reaction to God's prophetic word is a matter of the heart as it prompts the spiritual allegiances and commitments of the people. That prophetic word concerns the possibility of spiritual change on a fundamental level, and it affirms the miraculous possibility that God will renew a covenant relationship with his people. What Jeremiah projects as God's future grace finds ultimate fulfillment in the coming of Christ and his offer of new life.

A few years ago the popular movie *Places in the Heart* concerned matters of injustice and hatred and the possibility that God would work through the lives of people for reconciliation and spiritual renewal. This film was a gripping drama because it demonstrated both the power of sin to keep people mired in tragic habits of mind and the power of the gospel to bring to life what was completely missing in personal lives and community relationships.

In its conclusion, the movie provided a powerful testimony to the work of God in human hearts and the possibilities of forgiveness and renewal. The scene depicted a worship service, where community members, both Caucasian and African American, sat in proximity to one another and partook of the one communion table. It depicted that reconciliation is more than a change of mind; it is sharing of space and common commitments to one another. It is something that requires the presence of God because God is its author.

Exile and alienation are geographic and historical entities, but they are also powerful emotional forces. Only through God's grace can either the historical realities of sin or their emotional aftermath be removed and the affections of "another" heart be set in motion.

Jeremiah 25:1–38

THE WORD CAME to Jeremiah concerning all the people of Judah in the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, which was the first year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. ²So Jeremiah the prophet said to all the people of Judah and to all those living in Jerusalem: ³For twenty-three years—from the thirteenth year of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah until this very day—the word of the LORD has come to me and I have spoken to you again and again, but you have not listened.

⁴And though the LORD has sent all his servants the prophets to you again and again, you have not listened or paid any attention. ⁵They said, "Turn now, each of you, from your evil ways and your evil practices, and you can stay in the land the LORD gave to you and your fathers for ever and ever. ⁶Do not follow other gods to serve and worship them; do not provoke me to anger with what your hands have made. Then I will not harm you."

⁷"But you did not listen to me," declares the LORD, "and you have provoked me with what your hands have made, and you have brought harm to yourselves."

⁸Therefore the LORD Almighty says this: "Because you have not listened to my words, ⁹I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon," declares the LORD, "and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin. ¹⁰I will banish from them the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and

bridegroom, the sound of millstones and the light of the lamp. ¹¹This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

12"But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians, for their guilt," declares the LORD, "and will make it desolate forever. ¹³I will bring upon that land all the things I have spoken against it, all that are written in this book and prophesied by Jeremiah against all the nations. ¹⁴They themselves will be enslaved by many nations and great kings; I will repay them according to their deeds and the work of their hands."

¹⁵This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: "Take from my hand this cup filled with the wine of my wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. ¹⁶When they drink it, they will stagger and go mad because of the sword I will send among them."

¹⁷So I took the cup from the LORD's hand and made all the nations to whom he sent me drink it: ¹⁸Jerusalem and the towns of Judah, its kings and officials, to make them a ruin and an object of horror and scorn and cursing, as they are today; ¹⁹Pharaoh king of Egypt, his attendants, his officials and all his people, ²⁰ and all the foreign people there; all the kings of Uz; all the kings of the Philistines (those of Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron, and the people left at Ashdod); ²¹Edom, Moab and Ammon; ²²all the kings of Tyre and Sidon; the kings of the coastlands across the sea; ²³Dedan, Tema, Buz and all who are in distant places; ²⁴all the kings of Arabia and all the kings of the foreign people who live in the desert; ²⁵all the kings of Zimri. Elam and Media: ²⁶and all the kings of the north, near and far, one after the

other—all the kingdoms on the face of the earth. And after all of them, the king of Sheshach will drink it too.

Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Drink, get drunk and vomit, and fall to rise no more because of the sword I will send among you.' ²⁸But if they refuse to take the cup from your hand and drink, tell them, 'This is what the LORD Almighty says: You must drink it! ²⁹See, I am beginning to bring disaster on the city that bears my Name, and will you indeed go unpunished? You will not go unpunished, for I am calling down a sword upon all who live on the earth, declares the LORD Almighty.'

³⁰"Now prophesy all these words against them and say to them:

""The LORD will roar from on high; he will thunder from his holy dwelling and roar mightily against his land. He will shout like those who tread the grapes, shout against all who live on the earth.

31 The tumult will resound to the ends of the earth, for the LORD will bring charges against the nations; he will bring judgment on all mankind and put the wicked to the sword," declares the LORD.

³²This is what the LORD Almighty says:

"Look! Disaster is spreading from nation to nation; a mighty storm is rising from the ends of the earth." ³³At that time those slain by the LORD will be everywhere—from one end of the earth to the other. They will not be mourned or gathered up or buried, but will be like refuse lying on the ground.

³⁴Weep and wail, you shepherds; roll in the dust, you leaders of the flock.

For your time to be slaughtered has come; you will fall and be shattered like fine pottery.

35The shepherds will have nowhere to flee, the leaders of the flock no place to escape.

³⁶Hear the cry of the shepherds, the wailing of the leaders of the flock, for the LORD is destroying their pasture.

³⁷The peaceful meadows will be laid waste because of the fierce anger of the LORD.

³⁸Like a lion he will leave his lair, and their land will become desolate because of the sword of the oppressor and because of the LORD's fierce anger.

Original Meaning

AT ONE STAGE in the collection of Jeremiah's prophecies, chapter 25 likely concluded the collection or, at least, ended a section on judgment of the nations. Beginning with chapter 26, the reader of Jeremiah is provided with a series of biographical prose accounts about the prophet, which make a somewhat different impression than the preceding collections of poetic oracles. One may summarize the literary placement issue somewhat differently by observing that chapter 25 brings to a conclusion the first half

of the prophetic book. The material within it assists the reader in looking back to the poetic oracles or forward to the prose accounts.

It is possible that the early form of Jeremiah's prophecies recorded in Baruch's first scroll (ch. 36) ended with the almost apocalyptic portrayal of multinational judgment in chapter 25. Note the reference to Jeremiah's "book" in 25:13. In its current form chapter 25 in Hebrew has similarities to the oracles against the nations and Babylon in chapters 46–51, which now conclude the book. The initial verse of the chapter places the prophecy in the fourth year of Jehoiakim, which was also the first year of Nebuchadnezzar's kingship. This was a time of political change and uncertainty, when the political map was being redrawn by the Babylonians, and Jehoiakim, an Egyptian appointee, faced a dangerous and uncertain future. Jeremiah uses the opportunity to announce that the judgment to come on Judah is but a part of the administration of the Lord's justice in international affairs.

In the Greek version of Jeremiah's book, this chapter is much expanded to include additional oracles against the nations found elsewhere in the Hebrew version.² The peoples and nations named in 25:19–26 are contemporaries of Judah. They too have been assessed and founding wanting in the courts of the Lord. The language is stylized, and judgment is depicted on a universal scale. At points the depiction reflects a historical process in convulsion, as if to say that the decisive point in the judgment of the world has arrived (cf. 25:30–31). In other words, the chapter contains a combination of historical allusion and symbolic portrait, anticipating the apocalyptic language of Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Daniel and paving the way for the apocalyptic language in the New Testament.

25:1–14. This material reports oracular material that God gives to Jeremiah. That it is also a summary statement is clear from verse 3—a reference to twenty-three years of preaching on the part of the prophet. Jeremiah's work is set in the context of God's ongoing prophetic witness among the people carried out by his "servants the prophets" (26:5; cf. 2 Kings 9:7; 24:2). The refusal of the people to heed Jeremiah's warnings and earlier calls for repentance (cf. Jer. 25:5) has now led to the brink of judgment. Babylon, and more particularly Nebuchadnezzar, are identified as a foe from the north. The judgment to come on Judah and Jerusalem is only

part of what Nebuchadnezzar will do. Other nations will also come under his domination.

Verse 9 describes Nebuchadnezzar as God's "servant." This is a shocking term to use but fully consistent with Jeremiah's message. The prophet portrays the historical judgment to come on Judah as God's work against his sinful people. Nebuchadnezzar is not a "loose cannon" but an agent in the employ of God. In Daniel Nebuchadnezzar will bear witness in his own frailty that God is sovereign (Dan. 4:1–37). The king's servanthood does not make him morally superior or grant him saving knowledge of God. One may compare the language of "anointed" used to describe Cyrus in his historical role of liberator from the Exile, where it is explicitly stated that the Persian king does not know the Lord (Isa. 45:1–7).

In the judgments against Judah, a servitude to Babylon of "seventy years" is projected (Jer. 25:11–12). The actual period was about sixty-six years, if one reckons from the first year of Nebuchadnezzar's kingship in 605 B.C. to the fall of Babylon in 539, or seventy years almost exactly³ if one reckons from the destruction of the temple in 586 to its rededication in 516 (cf. Ezra 6:15). More likely, seventy is a round number representing the fulfillment of an extended period (2 Chron. 36:21; Zech. 1:12–14). It should be contrasted with the short period predicted by Hananiah for Babylonian hegemony (Jer. 28:3–4).⁴

That Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon are the Lord's servants in the historical process does not make them immune from his standards of justice, however. Babylon too will be judged for its iniquities (25:12–14). This short prophecy anticipates elements in chapters 46–49 (judgment against nations) and 50–51 (judgment against Babylon). As noted above, the oracles against the nations in chapters 46–51 actually come in the Greek version after 25:13 and its reference to "things ... prophesied by Jeremiah against all the nations."

25:15–38. This section vividly depicts the imagery of the nations drinking from the Lord's "cup" of wrath. Such a cup, which presupposes the staggering of someone inebriated and out of control, is a metaphor for the turmoil to come among the nations, when God's sword of judgment is unleashed. As a prophetic symbol of judgment, God's cup of wrath is widespread. In 51:7 Babylon herself is described as the intoxicating cup, but the cup is more usually related directly to God and his judgment.⁶

A long listing of states and rulers comprises a summary for "all the kingdoms on the face of the earth" (25:26). The exaggerated imagery continues with the naming of Babylon as Sheshach, a cryptogram or symbolic name. In turn, Babylon too will drink the cup of wrath.

All the nations are caught up in the description of the judgment to come. It is not just Jerusalem, "the city that bears [God's] Name" (v. 29), who will bear judgment. God is depicted as cosmic Judge, and the imagery employed suggests a type of sweeping judgment beyond the circumstances of the late seventh/early sixth centuries B.C. The face of the earth is strewn about with the effects of destruction. Here is prophetic proclamation like that in Daniel and Zechariah, which depict cataclysmic change in apocalyptic form.

Bridging Contexts

ORACLES AGAINST NATIONS. Oracles against nations are a common part of prophetic books (e.g., Isa. 13–23; Amos 1–2). There does not seem to be one reason for the judgments announced against these peoples. Perhaps they oppressed Israel or Judah, or perhaps their inhumanity, broadly distributed in their neighbors' suffering, has provoked the Lord to anger. But common to all these oracles is the assumption that the Lord is sovereign over all the nations (including Babylon). Jeremiah 25 makes this assumption plain by the radical claim that Nebuchadnezzar is the Lord's "servant" (25:9). Nebuchadnezzar's work in subjecting Judah (or other nations) to his rule is not against God's designs but part of them. That is the extent of his servanthood; he is a tool to carry out God's larger designs.

That such oracles are part of prophetic books is also part of God's design. The reference to God's "servants the prophets" (25:4) reflects God's commitment to interpreting his acts for his people through appointed means. The broader message seems to be: Listen and learn the ways of the Lord, who shapes history, judges iniquity, and seeks to form a people for himself from among the nations. In the stylized language of judgment (e.g., the cup of wrath or judgment, 25:17, 28; cf. 51:7), one encounters a mode of prophecy that will find echoes at Gethsemane (Matt. 26:39) and in John's visions (Rev. 16–17).

Jeremiah and Nebuchadnezzar. One might see the relevance of these differing claims about servants by thinking of "a tale of two servants"

(Nebuchadnezzar and Jeremiah). With apologies to Charles Dickens, one might see in Nebuchadnezzar's role the "best of times" for him and in Jeremiah's prophetic service "the worst of times" for the prophet. But there is an important caveat here. Nebuchadnezzar's historical success is no reason to think that he labors to be faithful to God, nor is Jeremiah's rejection and seeming failure any reason to think he has been faithless to God. On the contrary, readers should note carefully that the chapter is intended to explain why disaster overtook Judah and also to demonstrate that God is Lord of all nations.

There is a pattern portrayed in Jeremiah 25 that will repeat itself in history. Injustice and infidelity on the part of God's people lead to historical judgment. Yet how things change when seen in the light of God's plan to use whatever means necessary to carry out his judgment amid his larger redemptive purposes! Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom is now in the trash bin of history, but the heirs of Jeremiah's word are still the recipient of God's grace.

Contemporary Significance

HISTORICAL PROVIDENCE. The claims of chapter 25 play a significant role in assessing what is meant by God's historical providence. (1) The prophetic perspective on God's historical judgments is not so much a blueprint about the future as it is a revelation about God's purpose. Judgment in the historical process can be self-incurred, but its moral dimension is shaped by the Creator in surprising ways.

- (2) While God's purpose in judging and reforming his people takes shape in the historical process, God's providence was not limited to Israel, nor is it now limited to the church. Other nations, as part of God's universal purpose are judged and shaped as well.
- (3) Judgment is not all that God intends for the future of nations (cf. Gen. 12:3) as his near and far purposes are worked out.
- (4) The work of God is a process and not just an occasional event. Historical events are part of his proximate designs and are used in service of his eternal designs, which no one fully grasps. God's judgments are unsearchable (Rom. 11:33); they stand, however, in the service of his undeserved mercy—the ultimate goal of his providence.

In light of these affirmations Christians cannot assume that the misfortune of every nation is God's judgment and that a period of relative peace is evidence of his favor. God's work through the historical process is more complicated than that. There is no time in world history when this confession lacks application. The larger pattern can only be glimpsed by faith, and that faith must allow for a transhistorical culmination that cannot be fully grasped at any one point in history.

The book of Revelation (like Jeremiah) portrays the suffering of God's people as something that does come on the church because of some failures. Persecution of the church, however, becomes even more insidious precisely because some Christians seek to serve the risen Christ rather than Rome (symbolized in Revelation as Babylon!). The bowls of God's wrath strike universally. Nevertheless, the community of saints in the heavenly Jerusalem is drawn universally from all nations and peoples. From what angle can one possibly see the final result of God's work? Certainly not from within the span of historical existence. The full significance of God as Lord and Judge of all history is better seen at the end of history, not at its midpoint.

Perhaps one way for modern Christians to read the judgments against the nations in Jeremiah is to hear them as announcements of God's reckoning in the midst of a process that still continues and as historical signs of what the future will hold for the impenitent and unrighteous. Pertinent illustrations abound in the surprising changes of the last twenty years. Who would have predicted the dissolution of the USSR, the changes in Eastern Europe, or those in South Africa? Only time will tell their full impact, but even now God is at work in those circumstances and in the churches of these regions.

Seventy years. The prophecy of the seventy years reminds believers that God's means of testing and refining take time. As with the issues of universal justice and the fate of nations, a process of refinement is best understood at the end. How many people have confessed a quick fix in their Christian lives only to realize that God is not through with them yet? Sometimes the education and desired changes are just beginning! So it can be in the life of a congregation as well as in that of a people. God's process of sanctification has a goal, but we may never see it fully realized in our lifetime. Such was the fate of many in Jeremiah's day who trudged into exile and died there. It was also the privilege of Jeremiah to say that the

process did not end with the Exile. In the cross and resurrection, believers have seen that it does not end with death either.

A profound interpretation of the cup that sends the nations reeling comes with Jesus' wrestling prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36–46). He knows that the manifestation of God's righteous judgment is at hand. Indeed, it is about to fall on him as a sacrificial lamb. In prayer he struggles to bring his emotions into line with what he knows to be God's will. He will trust God with the immediate events to come—though they entail much suffering on his part—because he trusts God with the future of all his creation.

Jeremiah 26:1–24

¹EARLY IN THE REIGN of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, this word came from the LORD: ²"This is what the LORD says: Stand in the courtyard of the LORD's house and speak to all the people of the towns of Judah who come to worship in the house of the LORD. Tell them everything I command you; do not omit a word. ³Perhaps they will listen and each will turn from his evil way. Then I will relent and not bring on them the disaster I was planning because of the evil they have done. ⁴Say to them, 'This is what the LORD says: If you do not listen to me and follow my law, which I have set before you, ⁵and if you do not listen to the words of my servants the prophets, whom I have sent to you again and again (though you have not listened), ⁶then I will make this house like Shiloh and this city an object of cursing among all the nations of the earth."

⁷The priests, the prophets and all the people heard Jeremiah speak these words in the house of the LORD. ⁸But as soon as Jeremiah finished telling all the people everything the LORD had commanded him to say, the priests, the prophets and all the people seized him and said, "You must die! ⁹Why do you prophesy in the LORD's name that this house will be like Shiloh and this city will be desolate and deserted?" And all the people crowded around Jeremiah in the house of the LORD.

¹⁰When the officials of Judah heard about these things, they went up from the royal palace to the house of the LORD and took their places at the entrance of the New Gate of the LORD's house. ¹¹Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and all the people, "This man should be

sentenced to death because he has prophesied against this city. You have heard it with your own ears!"

12Then Jeremiah said to all the officials and all the people: "The LORD sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the things you have heard. ¹³Now reform your ways and your actions and obey the LORD your God. Then the LORD will relent and not bring the disaster he has pronounced against you. ¹⁴As for me, I am in your hands; do with me whatever you think is good and right. ¹⁵Be assured, however, that if you put me to death, you will bring the guilt of innocent blood on yourselves and on this city and on those who live in it, for in truth the LORD has sent me to you to speak all these words in your hearing."

¹⁶Then the officials and all the people said to the priests and the prophets, "This man should not be sentenced to death! He has spoken to us in the name of the LORD our God."

¹⁷Some of the elders of the land stepped forward and said to the entire assembly of people, ¹⁸"Micah of Moresheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah. He told all the people of Judah, 'This is what the LORD Almighty says:

""Zion will be plowed like a field,
Jerusalem will become a heap of
rubble,
the temple hill a mound overgrown
with thickets."

¹⁹"Did Hezekiah king of Judah or anyone else in Judah put him to death? Did not Hezekiah fear the LORD and seek his favor? And did not the LORD relent, so that he did not bring the disaster he

pronounced against them? We are about to bring a terrible disaster on ourselves!"

²⁰(Now Uriah son of Shemaiah from Kiriath Jearim was another man who prophesied in the name of the LORD; he prophesied the same things against this city and this land as Jeremiah did.
²¹When King Jehoiakim and all his officers and officials heard his words, the king sought to put him to death. But Uriah heard of it and fled in fear to Egypt. ²²King Jehoiakim, however, sent Elnathan son of Acbor to Egypt, along with some other men.
²³They brought Uriah out of Egypt and took him to King Jehoiakim, who had him struck down with a sword and his body thrown into the burial place of the common people.)

²⁴Furthermore, Ahikam son of Shaphan supported Jeremiah, and so he was not handed over to the people to be put to death.

Original Meaning

CHAPTER 25 IS prose and poetry; it served as a concluding portion to the first half of this book. Chapter 26 begins a series of narratives in chronological order about the prophet and his public ministry, along with references to specific kings and their reigns.

Chapter 26 contains a portion of a message delivered at the temple in the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign (609/608 B.C.), along with an extended account of the audience reaction. Jehoiakim was the third king to rule in less than a year's time. Upon Josiah's death, the people of the land had appointed Jehoahaz, the son of Josiah and younger brother of Jehoiakim, as king. The Egyptians removed him and put Jehoiakim on the throne (2 Kings 23:29–35). It was a time of uncertainty for the direction of the Judean state. The previous chapter concerns a message from the fourth year of Jehoiakim.

Jeremiah's oral message is summarized in Jer. 26:1–6. This sounds like an abbreviated form of the longer message delivered at the temple and

recorded in Jeremiah 7. Whether or not chapter 26 and chapter 7 are two accounts of the same "sermon" is debated among interpreters. The primary difference between the chapters comes in the attention given to audience reaction. Here Jeremiah engages his audience in debate (26:7–19) over the validity of his prophetic word. A summary comment is appended in 26:20–24 that describes the martyrdom of the prophet Uriah and the crucial support given Jeremiah by Ahikam the son of Shaphan. In any case, chapter 7 preserves the longer form of the same message, whether or not it is the same incident.

26:1–6. Jeremiah warns the people that if they fail to follow the instruction (*tora*, v. 4)² of the Lord, they will bring calamity on themselves. This is a typical form of the act-consequence claim: Disobedience brings disaster. Not following the Lord's instruction is the same thing as not listening to the Lord and not heeding the words of his "servants the prophets." As Jeremiah will argue in the debate with his audience, he stands in this line of prophets sent (*šlḥ*) by the Lord because, like them, the Lord has also "sent" (*šlḥ*) him (26:12–15). The temple will be destroyed in the coming judgment, just like the destruction of the worship center at Shiloh during the days of the judges and the prophet Samuel.⁴

Jeremiah's words about the temple strike a chord with his audience. It is God's "house," and the assumption of many in the audience is that God will protect it no matter what. Also, for some in the audience, to speak against the temple is tantamount to speaking against God himself. This is blasphemy. The form of Jeremiah's proclamation, however, is a warning and a call for repentance. The historical fate of the temple is actually influenced by the actions of the people.

26:7–19. Opposition to the "temple sermon," with its prediction that the temple will be destroyed, is widespread and intense. Priests and prophets (cf. 26:16), as well as "the people," propose the death sentence for what appears to them as both blasphemy and treason. The essentials of a public trial ensue, when certain officials take their seat in the New Gate of the temple complex (26:10). Such a location lends gravity to the situation and the charges against the prophet. He will be judged in the context of the temple complex against which he himself has just announced the possibility of judgment (cf. also ch. 20).

Jeremiah defends himself as one in the line of prophets whom the Lord has sent to warn his people about the consequences of disobedience to his instruction (cf. 26:5). He recognizes that he is "in [their] hands" (26:14)—that is, he is on trial—but he warns them that if they execute him, they will incur the judgment of bringing "innocent blood on yourselves." There are two implications of this claim. (1) The shedding of innocent blood will bring guilt on the assembly and the place. The Old Testament is strongly oriented to the claim that unrequited blood brings a community or people into the sphere of guilt. (2) Jeremiah is thereby reminding the people indirectly that as "innocent" of their charges, he is one of the prophets sent by the Lord. To put it in a kind of syllogism: If Jeremiah speaks a word against the temple in the name of the Lord, yet is innocent of blasphemy, then the word he speaks must come from the Lord.

This second point, at least, gains a hearing for Jeremiah among some of the people. He has spoken to them in the name of the Lord (as opposed to the prompting of another deity or offering his own political commentary). He meets, therefore, at least one of Deuteronomy's criteria for judging prophecy (Deut. 13). Some elders of the land add that Jeremiah is no different from Micah of Moresheth, who prophesied in Hezekiah's reign that Jerusalem would be destroyed (26:18 = Mic. 3:12). Apparently they agree that Micah was one of God's servants the prophets. King Hezekiah, they remind the court, did not execute Micah; instead, he feared the Lord, and the Lord relented concerning the announced judgment. In an unintended prophecy, the elders conclude that by the present course of action (opposing Jeremiah rather than heeding his warning), the people are doing great harm to themselves. This is a tacit recognition of Jeremiah's claim that to execute him would bring guilt on the place.

In referring to the prophecy of Micah, the people engage in a type of exegesis or interpretation of their religious traditions. Just as Jeremiah drew a comparison between the Jerusalem of his day with the Shiloh of Samuel's day, so they draw a comparison of Jeremiah's message with that of Micah. The elders put the work of Micah and the response of Hezekiah together in a more explicit way than either 2 Kings or 2 Chronicles (the two narratives about Hezekiah's reign) or the book of Micah itself does. The elders do not quote Micah's prophecy about Jerusalem as part of a warning or a call to repentance. In Micah 3:12 the prophet announces judgment to come. The people understand, however, that Hezekiah's reaction to the prophecy was

genuine repentance and that God used the unconditional prophecy to move the king and people toward change.

26:20–24. A prophet named Uriah, however, was not given the reprieve accorded Jeremiah. King Jehoiakim's anger against prophets who announced the Lord's judgment on Judah led to the extradition of Uriah from Egypt (where he had fled) and his execution. It should be remembered that Jehoiakim was appointed king by the Egyptians, so the Egyptian officials were likely to cooperate with him. The narrator notes incidentally that the body of Uriah was thrown in the burial place of the common people. This was intended as a further sign that Uriah was not a real prophet. In another context, Jeremiah prophesies that Jehoiakim's burial will be that of a donkey—tossed outside the gate of the city (22:19; cf. 36:30).

Jehoiakim's execution of Uriah thereby brings the judgment of "innocent blood" on himself and his administration. Jeremiah too might have been executed except that an important official, Ahikam' son of Shaphan, stood on his side. With Ahikam one gets a glimpse of someone who sympathized with Jeremiah and his prophetic task. His brother later lends to Baruch, Jeremiah's scribe, his office ("room") overlooking the temple complex (36:10).

Bridging Contexts

Interpreting Scripture within Scripture. How does one deal with a prophecy of the Lord's judgment like this one? Such is the fascinating challenge of Jeremiah 26. Readers will see in the recorded response to Jeremiah's "sermon" an example of inner-scriptural interpretation, as hearers attempt to put Jeremiah's words in historical and theological contexts. Apparently the majority of the audience believe that Jeremiah has committed blasphemy and treason because they cannot fathom why God would announce the destruction of his own house. Perhaps they also feel that Jeremiah has overreacted to some minor spiritual failings regarding the covenant responsibilities of Judah.

The primary issue according to the prophet, however, is the comparison of Jerusalem with the worship center at Shiloh (26:9). Jeremiah offers a typological comparison between the days of the judges, when the corrupt

worship center at Shiloh and the priestly line of Eli were destroyed, and the circumstances of Judah under Jehoiakim. To use an anachronistic phrase, what we have here is an example of Scripture interpreting Scripture.

In his defense before the assembled court and people, Jeremiah claims membership in the line of prophets whom the Lord has sent to warn his people about the consequences of their failure. Jeremiah's opponents cannot claim ignorance of such prophets or of the use God made of them in a previous generation; the questions are whether Jeremiah's diagnosis of the times is accurate and whether he himself stands in their succession.

Another example of bridging contexts comes in the elders' citation of Micah's prophecy concerning Jerusalem during the days of Hezekiah. This is a rare example in the Old Testament of a quote now contained in another prophetic book, complete with reference to time and place. It is a second example (to be anachronistic) of Scripture interpreting Scripture. Interpreters all recognize that Jeremiah has been influenced by the prophecies of Hosea. Here, however, his prophecy is compared to that of another eighth-century prophet, Micah, who announced judgment on Jerusalem. The elders assume that Micah was a prophet sent by the Lord; furthermore, Micah induced the fear of the Lord in Hezekiah, and the king's response to the prophetic word averted that word's announced wrath from God.

Here one encounters the claim that the predictions of a "true" prophet do not always come to pass literally; if the announced judgment provokes the fear of the Lord and evidence of faithful living, then it has served a divine purpose. The response of the people to Jeremiah and, above all, the response of Jehoiakim to Uriah demonstrate that the judgment predicted by Jeremiah will ultimately come. This is foreshadowed by the comment of the elders that the rejection of Jeremiah will result in great harm coming on the people (26:19).

Uriah was given a prophet's "reward" (Matt. 5:10–12) and executed. He was a martyr, whose witness would have gone unrecorded had it not been noted here. God sent a line of prophets, but the people have not listened. Uriah has an honored place in that line of witnesses.

The reform movement. Jeremiah's words have not fallen on completely deaf ears! Even if the disaster announced cannot be averted, the response of the elders is the beginnings of a reform movement and perhaps also an

indication of the circles of people who "remember" his words. Ahikam too seems to be a supporter of Jeremiah's call for holy living and wholehearted obedience to the Lord's instructions. He is from a family of scribes with a distinguished record of service to Judah. He is another member of the (often unnamed and unmentioned) reform movement that hear Jeremiah's words and help to preserve them for posterity.

Contemporary Significance

LISTENING TO A PROPHETIC WARNING. How does one listen to a prophetic warning or announcement of disaster to come? One should not simply ask about the dire circumstances of the past, as if biblical interpretation is finished when one understands what was wrong. There is the responsibility also of a faithful reading where one shines the light of hard sayings on a personal or corporate present. In doing so, the issue is not to find a one-to-one correspondence between then and now but a theological link between the call to faithful living then and the call to faithful living in the present. There is also the issue of act and consequence, something the prophets specialize in uncovering. What will be the results of my life or that of a church or community if things do not change? What changes is God calling for among his people?

Jeremiah was put on trial for his warning about judgment to come. Is a clear warning about judgment to come what is required for a faithful rendering of Jeremiah 26 for today? Certainly this is possible, but it is not necessarily the case. One way to understand the contemporary significance of judgmental prophecy in Scripture is to interpret it as an example for later instruction. As such, one must decide first if it is a warning to society as a whole or to one particular community (e.g., a church), or if the application is a more personal matter.

If we conclude that the warning is to society as a whole, then one should be prepared for the question: "Why should they even listen?" Or what about the church? Should the church acknowledge its failures and weaknesses? That is easy to answer; surely, it should! And while the church has good theological reasons for being concerned about destructive trends in society, the light of God's Word should go first to the life of God's people to expose what is wrong and hurtful about its own witness.

Heeding judgment. The response of the elders of the land indicates another way in which this chapter may take on contemporary significance. Notice how carefully they listen to Jeremiah and compare his word with that of another prophet who brought a judgmental word from the Lord. They ask: What did that prophecy evoke among its hearers? Unfortunately, the repentance evoked in Hezekiah was not matched in Jeremiah's day by either King Jehoiakim or the people, but the question starts the search for application in the hearers' own day.

Judgmental prophecy does not reach its final goal when (or even if) a predicted disaster occurs. Micah was a true prophet in that he brought about a change in Judah, although the judgment he announced did not come to pass. Judgmental prophecy is a sharp way of defining who God is, a God who takes his people seriously as covenant partners in his work of bringing justice and redemption to the world. Does God have standards? Yes! Is he committed to the righteousness and integrity of his people? Yes! While God may vindicate his righteousness through judgment of the wicked (and thereby instruct others), such judgment (enacted in history or simply announced) may also serve the larger ends of renewing his people. Both righteousness and renewal are goals of God according to the broader scriptural witness. Attaining these goals through refinement is a consistent pattern of God's dealings with his people.

Standing with the prophets. Perhaps Christians should be wary of a too-ready identification with Jeremiah. After all, God does not call each of his people to be a prophet any more than God requires all congregations to engage consistently in prophetic witness. Ahikam, however, represents a person of some repute and influence in the larger Judean society who responds to the hostile reception of Jeremiah by standing with him. When Jeremiah's life was "on the line," in a sense the integrity of Ahikam's faith was also "on the line." This is what the prophecy evoked in his personal life. He did not take the easy way out, which in this case meant acquiescence to the majority view. In Jeremiah's hour of need Ahikam put his reputation and influence to good use. Perhaps we can say that he acted out of a shared conviction with Jeremiah that the Lord they both worshiped had rightly announced a judgment on iniquity.

The future judgment will take its course from the present realities—unless the people can be brought to their theological senses, which seems

unlikely. It is more important that Ahikam stand up and be counted than that he "win the day"; although without his influence, it is likely that Jeremiah would have perished at the hands of the prophets and priests who opposed him. Ahikam is a disciple, one of the "seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to the Baal," one of those effective witnesses whose work has great influence at a crucial time but whose name is not remembered by many. He is an example of that great truth that God's Word does not return to him void, nor finally does the life of God's servants become void. By God's grace there will be someone (or some people!) who have the spiritual ears to hear what a true prophet has to say.

In April 1999 the United States was brought to a state of collective shock over the senseless murders of students and a teacher at Columbine High School in the Denver area. Much has been written about the multiple tragedies of that fateful day. Two disturbed and disaffected students took senseless vengeance on their school community before turning the guns on themselves. One chilling account comes with the testimony of students who saw or heard the killers stalking their prey in the school building, then stopping and asking one young woman (according to reports, Cassie Bernall) if she believed in God. When she answered "yes," they shot her. She was one of thirteen victims to die. There are reports that the killers asked the same question of another young woman and that she answered in the affirmative before being shot.

One cannot know what went through the minds of the young women in the last seconds before their murder. One thought perhaps was that the murderers felt rage at God and the pretensions of classmates to believe and trust in him, and that now these demented boys were going to make the girls victims of that rage. Indeed, they were victims, but more than that, they were witnesses. We have only the brief reference to Uriah or to the courage of Ahikam. They did what they did and stood where they stood because they believed in God. We need not ask the modern psychological question of what they thought at the moments of decision; we should, however, give thanks that they acted on what they believed. And we should be reminded that God asks that of all disciples of his Son.

Jeremiah 27:1–22

EARLY IN THE REIGN of Zedekiah son of Josiah king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²This is what the LORD said to me: "Make a voke out of straps and crossbars and put it on your neck. ³Then send word to the kings of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre and Sidon through the envoys who have come to Jerusalem to Zedekiah king of Judah. ⁴Give them a message for their masters and say, 'This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Tell this to your masters: 5With my great power and outstretched arm I made the earth and its people and the animals that are on it, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁶Now I will hand all your countries over to my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; I will make even the wild animals subject to him. ⁷All nations will serve him and his son and his grandson until the time for his land comes; then many nations and great kings will subjugate him.

8""If, however, any nation or kingdom will not serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon or bow its neck under his yoke, I will punish that nation with the sword, famine and plague, declares the LORD, until I destroy it by his hand. 9So do not listen to your prophets, your diviners, your interpreters of dreams, your mediums or your sorcerers who tell you, 'You will not serve the king of Babylon.' 10They prophesy lies to you that will only serve to remove you far from your lands; I will banish you and you will perish. 11But if any nation will bow its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him, I will let that nation remain in its own land to till it and to live there, declares the LORD.""

Judah. I said, "Bow your neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon; serve him and his people, and you will live. ¹³Why will you and your people die by the sword, famine and plague with which the LORD has threatened any nation that will not serve the king of Babylon? ¹⁴Do not listen to the words of the prophets who say to you, 'You will not serve the king of Babylon,' for they are prophesying lies to you. ¹⁵'I have not sent them,' declares the LORD. 'They are prophesying lies in my name. Therefore, I will banish you and you will perish, both you and the prophets who prophesy to you.'"

¹⁶Then I said to the priests and all these people, "This is what the LORD says: Do not listen to the prophets who say, 'Very soon now the articles from the LORD's house will be brought back from Babylon.' They are prophesying lies to you. ¹⁷Do not listen to them. Serve the king of Babylon, and you will live. Why should this city become a ruin? ¹⁸If they are prophets and have the word of the LORD, let them plead with the LORD Almighty that the furnishings remaining in the house of the LORD and in the palace of the king of Judah and in Jerusalem not be taken to Babylon. ¹⁹For this is what the LORD Almighty says about the pillars, the Sea, the movable stands and the other furnishings that are left in this city, ²⁰which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon did not take away when he carried Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim king of Judah into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, along with all the nobles of Judah and Jerusalem—²¹ves, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says about the things that are left in the house of the LORD and in the palace of the king of Judah and in Jerusalem: ²² They will be taken to Babylon and there they will

remain until the day I come for them,' declares the LORD. 'Then I will bring them back and restore them to this place.'"

Original Meaning

THIS CHAPTER IS PART of a larger unit that includes chapters 28–29. It is influenced also by the narrative in chapter 26. It is particularly important to note the relationship between chapters 27 and 28 because text-critical problems in 27:1 and 28:1 have made interpretation more difficult. Chapters 27 and 28 are linked by the report of Jeremiah's wearing a yoke (of thongs and wooden bars) as a prophetic sign that Nebuchadnezzar's claim on Judah has been granted him by the Lord. In chapter 27 Jeremiah reports that the Lord commanded him to make a yoke and to wear it and that the Lord sent him to prophesy that Nebuchadnezzar has been granted sovereignty over nations (including Judah). Jeremiah also reports that the Lord has some sharp words for the various prophets and diviners who have prophesied differently concerning Babylonian rule (cf. ch. 13). The conflict with these prophets continues in chapters 28–29.

Readers should compare translations of 26:1; 27:1; and 28:1, along with any marginal explanations provided by the translators. Often English translations have small print or marginal notes that inform the reader that the translators have made a text-critical choice in the rendering; that is, they have chosen from different words or phrases preserved in the ancient manuscripts.

The problems for translation *and interpretation* of 27:1 lie in the variants preserved in Hebrew and Greek manuscripts. The majority of Hebrew manuscripts for 27:1 preserve the rendering "in the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim ... the word came to Jeremiah." "Jehoiakim" is clearly wrong, perhaps mistakenly copied from 26:1, because Zedekiah is the Judean monarch addressed in the prophetic oracle (27:3, 12). The NIV translators have recognized the copy error and followed a "minority reading" in some Hebrew manuscripts, where the appropriate name Zedekiah is preserved.

Recognition that Zedekiah is the correct name in 27:1 solves only one of the problems for interpreting the chapter, however. Insofar as chapters 27 and 28 should be read together as a narrative witness to the work of Jeremiah in wearing a yoke, Jeremiah 28:1 also has a problem. In Hebrew this text begins, "and it happened in that year in the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah ..."; then the text continues, "in the fourth month of the fifth year." The problem is that the fifth year of Zedekiah does not easily qualify as "the beginning of his reign," nor is the "fifth month" the beginning of a year. Probably the phrase "beginning of the reign" (also used in 26:1) has the technical meaning of "accession year." The phrase could perhaps fit the circumstances of 27:1–3, which narrate events in the accession or initial year of Zedekiah as monarch, but it fits poorly in 28:1. The more likely explanation is that the chronological headings for chapters 26–28 have become mixed during the process of transmitting the material to final written form.

A plausible solution to these difficulties is at hand if one takes the qualification of the fourth year of Zedekiah seriously in 28:1, as well as the proposal that the events of chapter 28 occur in the same year as those of chapter 27. The fourth year of Zedekiah (594/593 B.C.) coincides with a serious rebellion in the east against Babylon. If chapter 27 describes an event in the fourth year of Zedekiah, then the notation that Zedekiah and ambassadors from several neighboring states have assembled in Jerusalem (27:3) takes on significance. This conference included discussion about the possibility of a revolt against Babylon, using a political threat to Babylonian hegemony in the east as an occasion for some states west of Babylon to meet for talk. Apparently many priests, prophets, and diviners of various kinds lent their support to this anti-Babylonian movement (27:9, 16). Jeremiah's encounter with Hananiah recorded in chapter 28, where he is still wearing the yoke mentioned in chapter 27, continues the debate among the prophets over the role Babylon will play in the Lord's economy.

In chapter 29 one finds references to prophets among the Judean exiles in Babylon who are predicting a quick end to Babylonian hegemony. This chapter too presupposes a time after the initial Babylonian siege of Jerusalem and the taking of Jehoiachin and others into exile. In other words, a date in the fourth year of Zedekiah fits the historical context nicely for chapters 27–29.

Jeremiah's message in chapter 27 is that God has given a limited historical sovereignty to Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar. This applies to the Transjordanian states of Edom, Moab, and Ammon as well as the city-states

of Tyre and Sidon, all of which are mentioned in 27:3. To oppose Babylon at this time is to oppose God's will as Creator and Lord. In this style of presentation, Jeremiah shows himself to be a prophet to the nations (cf. 1:5).

In keeping with prophecies made elsewhere (25:13; 29:10), the end of Babylonian supremacy is also acknowledged. Babylon's end is noted (27:7), as is God's intent to restore the temple vessels taken by Nebuchadnezzar and those of his people now in exile (27:22).⁴

The majority of chapter 27 concerns the work of other prophets who oppose the message of Jeremiah (27:9, 14–18). One wonders at the level of interchange between these various interpreter's of God's will. The events of 598/597 B.C., when Babylon came up against Judah and Jerusalem, did not quite fulfill the prophetic words of either Jeremiah or his opponents. Jeremiah's years of proclaiming an assault on Jerusalem have proved true, but the city itself has survived. Those who prophesied "peace" have been proved wrong, but the Judean state and its capital are still intact.

Verse 9 provides an intriguing list of mediators and specialists for determining the will of the gods. Five specialists are mentioned: prophets, diviners, interpreters of dreams, mediums, and sorcerers.⁵ In times of threat and calamity, such people have plenty of customers. The text does not make any distinction between those practitioners who have sought the Lord's will through their rituals and those who may have consulted another deity. All alike are rejected.

With all of the language of judgment in chapter 27, the concluding verses point to a time when God will bring back temple vessels from Babylon to Jerusalem (27:16–22). Babylon did not take them away because God was impotent—Nebuchadnezzar is God's servant, not vanquisher. The vessels will be returned when God is ready. This concluding comment makes for a transition to the account of Jeremiah's encounter with Hananiah in chapter 28. There too the concern is ostensibly about the temple vessels and related matters, but the deeper issue remains the same.

Bridging Contexts

WORD AND DEED. Chapter 27 records two of the favorite devices of the Old Testament prophets: a word from the Lord and a symbolic act to embody

the message. Word and deed go together in prophetic ministry, whether the deed is a sign of a particular message (as here in chs. 27–28) or whether the life of the messenger more broadly speaking is congruent with the message. This is a pattern that both the leaders of God's people and the people themselves should recognize. A consistency of word and deed do not guarantee the authenticity of a message, but it is a valuable indicator of commitment.

Jeremiah is in good company. Isaiah and Ezekiel combined word and deed on several occasions. Prophetic ministry requires a commitment of one's whole life, for even personal details such as marriage, children, and grief over personal loss become vehicles for prophetic proclamation. This is true of Jeremiah's prayers. His "confessions" in chapters 11–20 are vehicles for carrying out his commission as prophet to the nations, since their place in the prophetic book means they too are part of the instructional package. The symbolic acts of prophets are part of an incarnational style of ministry, much like that of Jesus, whose words and deeds embodied his message and served as signs of his true identity.

God's sovereignty over the nations. Chapter 27 is set in the broad biblical context of God's sovereignty over creation and history. The claim is not that people and places are puppets, but that in creation and through the historical process God is working out his purposes of judgment, refinement, transformation, and redemption. Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon are God's servants, as were the Assyrians before and Cyrus and the Persians after. Rome too served God in various ways, as the New Testament writers make clear. None of these historical "servants" of God can boast of moral superiority or freedom from the judgment that the historical process will ultimately bring on them. Nebuchadnezzar will have his day; even the beasts of the field are his (27:5–6)! But God also has his day, when Nebuchadnezzar eats straw like an animal and when the great Babylon eventually falls (Dan. 4:28–33).

Contemporary Significance

GOD'S PRIMARY GOAL. People instinctively pull for underdogs. In political terms it is easy to be sympathetic towards those groups who have had little autonomy and whose voices are not often heard. Since the birth of the

United States came about as political underdogs fought for more autonomy and religious freedom, it is easy for most North American Christians to sympathize with Zedekiah and the ambassadors from neighboring states. Indeed, most of the world's peoples understand the yearning of the Judeans and the others as they rebel against foreign domination. No more tribute! No more humiliation! Surely God wants them to be free!

A close reading of chapter 27 (and 28) reveals that God did want his people free—but free from the enslavement to sin and not just free from Babylonian hegemony. The issue first was timing (27:7), but timing pointed to a larger issue: God's relationship to a recalcitrant people. It is a process that the prophet underscores in his words. God intends to judge the people for their iniquities, to refine them through the process of political servitude, and then to use them as instructional examples to later generations of his people. This is a sobering thought, but Jeremiah's yoke does not just represent Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon; it also represents God's judgment on Judah and the neighboring states. Even more radically, the yoke represents the will of God himself to constrain his people.

A modern application of this message must be quick to deny that all peoples who languish under oppressive regimes or that all individuals who suffer emotional and physical exile are bound in these conditions by God's judgment. Scripture gives no blanket warrant for such a claim. Some people (including some Christians) find unpalatable any thought of oppression and exile as God's refining judgment. Scripture gives no warrant for that claim either. The issues with which Jeremiah 27 are concerned are those of God's timing and the larger design of his historical purposes in forming a people for himself. It is simply true that God's timing is often not "our" timing and God's ways are not our ways (Isa. 55:8). What Jeremiah calls his contemporaries to believe is that their first impulse is wrong. They have yet to see the error of their ways, and until God has dealt with that, there will be no successful liberation from political oppression or anything else.

It is ironic that the prophets and priests who oppose Jeremiah are so concerned with the temple vessels. They are so concerned with God's honor, yet they have not seen how Judah's covenantal failures have offended God's honor and spurned his love. They are convinced, furthermore, that God will act quickly to restore "his" vessels. "In good time," is Jeremiah's reply. Yes, God will restore the temple vessels, but God

is more concerned with the fate of his people and the refining judgment they must undergo. Ultimately God will bring a merciful end to Babylonian supremacy and in the process will restore his people. His goal is (and remains!) to make his people fit vessels for his service, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (1 Peter 2:9).

Over the course of centuries, any number of councils and high-level meetings have convened to influence the direction of God's people. Some have been productive; others have not. Just as Jeremiah wandered about with his yoke, so various protesters and lobbyists, preachers and prophets stand to proclaim their message. It is not always easy to tell the genuine article from the counterfeit, when considering their causes. One motive, however, remains constant: God seeks a holy people who will trust him with their lives.

Jeremiah 28:1–17

In the fifth month of that same year, the fourth year, early in the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah, the prophet Hananiah son of Azzur, who was from Gibeon, said to me in the house of the LORD in the presence of the priests and all the people: ²"This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon. ³Within two years I will bring back to this place all the articles of the LORD's house that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon removed from here and took to Babylon. ⁴I will also bring back to this place Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim king of Judah and all the other exiles from Judah who went to Babylon,' declares the LORD, 'for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.'"

⁵Then the prophet Jeremiah replied to the prophet Hananiah before the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the LORD. ⁶He said, "Amen! May the LORD do so! May the LORD fulfill the words you have prophesied by bringing the articles of the LORD's house and all the exiles back to this place from Babylon. ⁷Nevertheless, listen to what I have to say in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people: ⁸From early times the prophets who preceded you and me have prophesied war, disaster and plague against many countries and great kingdoms. ⁹But the prophet who prophesies peace will be recognized as one truly sent by the LORD only if his prediction comes true."

¹⁰Then the prophet Hananiah took the yoke off the neck of the prophet Jeremiah and broke it, ¹¹and he said before all the people, "This is what the LORD says: 'In the same way will I break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon off the neck of all the nations within two years.'" At this, the prophet Jeremiah went on his way.

12Shortly after the prophet Hananiah had broken the yoke off the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: 13"Go and tell Hananiah, 'This is what the LORD says: You have broken a wooden yoke, but in its place you will get a yoke of iron. 14This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: I will put an iron yoke on the necks of all these nations to make them serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and they will serve him. I will even give him control over the wild animals."

¹⁵Then the prophet Jeremiah said to Hananiah the prophet, "Listen, Hananiah! The LORD has not sent you, yet you have persuaded this nation to trust in lies. ¹⁶Therefore, this is what the LORD says: 'I am about to remove you from the face of the earth. This very year you are going to die, because you have preached rebellion against the LORD.'"

¹⁷In the seventh month of that same year, Hananiah the prophet died.

Original Meaning

JEREMIAH'S ENCOUNTERS WITH HANANIAH comprise one of the best-known accounts in this prophetic book. The first verse of the chapter ties the encounter with the efforts in Zedekiah's fourth year (594/593 B.C.) to foment a rebellion against Babylonian control. Although the date in the fourth year is explicit, the reference to "early in the reign of Zedekiah" seems out of place. As indicated in the commentary on chapter 27, a serious rebellion broke out against Babylon at this time in the eastern section of the empire, and other states subjected to Babylon were tempted to declare themselves independent. In chapter 27 one finds the account of a

conference for state diplomats held in Jerusalem, where the discussion apparently included anti-Babylonian proposals. Jeremiah wore a yoke at that time to symbolize God's intention to place Judah in servitude to Babylon.

28:1–11. Hananiah bears all the marks of a prophet of the Lord. His name means the "The LORD is [or has been] gracious." The fact that he is from Gibeon is helpful to identify him, but that fact may have no other significance for understanding his actions. When he speaks, his words are prefaced by the announcement, "This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says" (28:2). Hananiah prophesies that God will restore to Jerusalem the temple vessels taken by the Babylonians in 597 B.C. and the exiled Judean king. Concern about the temple vessels and the words of Jeremiah's prophetic opponents have been mentioned in 27:16–22. Hananiah, therefore, represents one of the unnamed prophets, noted in chapter 27, who are leading the people astray.

Hananiah performs a prophetic symbolic act in breaking the wooden yoke that Jeremiah is wearing; this was Hananiah's illustration of his prophecy that the Lord will break the yoke of Babylon, which is constraining and humiliating Judah. Hananiah believes in the power of the Lord to overcome Babylonian rule and to restore the exiled king Jehoiachin,² the other exiles deported in 597 B.C., and even the temple vessels taken by the Babylonian army. Throughout the chapter Hananiah is described as "the prophet" (28:1, 5, 10, 12, 15, 17).³ In the Greek translation of Jeremiah, Hananiah is explicitly described as a "false prophet," but the Hebrew text refrains from using an equivalent term. Both the terminology and the form of his public address indicate that he is a Yahwistic prophet, perhaps even one who has served God faithfully on previous occasions. Now, however, the content of his oracle is wrong. He will be shown wrong about God's timing and about God's intentions in using Babylonian might to chastise his people.

Hananiah makes his announcement that the Lord will soon overcome the Babylonians and restore the people and temple vessels in the courtyard of the temple complex (28:2–4). This setting is important to the context of the message and also to Jeremiah's ministry. On several occasions Jeremiah publicly prophesied in the temple. At the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign he offered a scathing review of misplaced confidence in the temple and called

for repentance from the evil course underway in Judah (26:1–6; cf. ch. 7; 19:14–15). After being forbidden to preach at the temple complex, Jeremiah sent his faithful secretary, Baruch, to read from a scroll of collected oracles (ch. 36). During Zedekiah's reign Jeremiah was in the temple complex and received a vision with an oracle attached to it (24:1–10).

Jeremiah's encounter with Hananiah in the temple symbolizes their differing viewpoints on what it means that God dwells in the midst of his people. Hananiah seems to think that God's presence means that God's defense of the house and the people is always near at hand.

Jeremiah's first reaction to the oracle of Hananiah ("Amen!" 28:6) seems to indicate that the prophecy impresses him. This reaction is in spite of the fact that Hananiah's proclamation goes against what he himself has prophesied. Jeremiah is open to hearing God speak through Hananiah. By way of first response, Jeremiah reminds Hananiah and their audience in the temple that prophets of the Lord have habitually announced disaster and judgment—the prophet who predicts peace will be vindicated only when that word comes to pass (28:8–9). This will indicate that it has come from God.

A prophecy of disaster or judgment, however, is evaluated differently. It is intended to evoke consternation and provoke people to action. The citation of Micah 3:12 in Jeremiah 26:18 is a good illustration of the point. Micah of Moresheth announced the coming destruction of Jerusalem. The proclamation was unconditional in form, yet what it provoked in Hezekiah and the people was enough for the Lord to relent and to keep from bringing the announced destruction to pass (26:19; see comments on ch. 26).

28:12–17. When Hananiah breaks the yoke worn by Jeremiah, Jeremiah does not reply immediately. This is another indication of the seriousness with which he takes Hananiah's prophetic efforts. It may also indicate that Jeremiah is humiliated by his first encounter with Hananiah. Subsequently the word of the Lord comes to him, and he confronts Hananiah with the message that Babylon rules with God's explicit assent and that Hananiah has made the people believe a "lie" (Heb. *šeqer*,⁴ used several times in chs. 27–29). Indeed, Hananiah's words are a rebellion against the will of the Lord. In place of the wooden yoke broken by Hananiah, Jeremiah proclaims that God will now place the people in servitude to Babylon through an iron yoke.

In a somber word, Jeremiah announces that Hananiah will die within the year (28:12–17). That death is interpreted as judgment on him and his word. This is in accord with Deuteronomy 18:20–22, where the penalty for preaching falsely in the name of the Lord is death. The narrative about Hananiah is an illustration of the charges elsewhere in Jeremiah concerning prophets who prophesy "peace, when there is no peace."

Bridging Contexts

THE HUMAN ELEMENT IN PROPHECY. The encounters between Hananiah and Jeremiah in chapter 28 are narrated as part of the immediate context (chs. 27–29) of Judean opposition to Babylon and the claims of many that the Lord is on the Judean side in that struggle. On the contrary, however, Jeremiah insists that God has temporarily granted sovereignty over Judah to Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon. Judah will serve Nebuchadnezzar because he serves the Lord as the historical agent of judgment. This entire book is an attempt to preserve the words of an unpopular prophet whose witness is recognized more clearly after the fall of Jerusalem. Even more broadly the encounters are a part of the larger scriptural witness that God does not leave his people without guidance, even if the majority are heedless of the message or oppose its tenor.

This chapter also underscores the human element in prophecy and in particular the humanness of Jeremiah. One gets no indication from the text that Hananiah has consciously deceived his audience. Presumably he truly believes his message; he cannot conceive of God as using the enemy of Judah as chastisement on Judah. Nor is Hananiah heterodox in prophetic practice—as if he depends on Baal for his inspiration. Everything about him suggests he is (and was) a prophet of Yahweh. Yet in his certainty and zeal for the Lord, he is wrong about the Lord's intentions. Moreover, he falls under the judgment of Deuteronomy 18:20–22 and its strictures against false prophecy. His word will not come true in two years' time, and he will die before that.

Jeremiah, on the other hand, has prophesied for years that God will bring judgment on Judah for its sinfulness. Is it possible that the burden he has carried for years is about to be lifted without the actual fall of Jerusalem and with the speedy return of exiled people and materials? Is the Lord

telling him through Hananiah that indeed the time for judgment will soon end? From Jeremiah's reaction, he takes this possibility seriously. Here is one prophet listening carefully to another, open to the possibility that God has initiated a new phase in his dealings with his people.

In his humanness and openness, Jeremiah offers a model of the prophetic office. He does not dictate infallibly; he remains open, yet is certain of two things: God will not leave himself without a witness to the people, and God can make abrupt changes in his dealings with his people. Jeremiah is open, therefore, to the idea that the tone and thrust of his past prophetic ministry (over thirty years in duration) will come to an end because God is about to initiate a new direction for his people.

Perhaps most surprising, Jeremiah is open to the possibility that Hananiah is God's prophet to announce such changes. In this openness to God and to prophetic instruction himself, Jeremiah *the prophet* (28:5, 10, 11, 12, 15) helps subsequent readers to grasp the relational nature of true prophecy. It remains open to further guidance from God, listening carefully to the voices among God's people, and it requires self-examination before speaking.

The nature of true prophecy. But Jeremiah indicates something else that is fundamental about the prophetic office: It is the nature of true prophecy to indicate where God's people have failed and need instruction (28:8–9). This is basic to the larger collection of prophetic books in the Old Testament. The majority of their contents is critical toward the Israelite or Judean audience. Here is a job description that is always "open." A criterion of true prophecy from the past is not whether what is announced comes true. True prophets focus on the failures of the people and the corresponding judgment to come (if the failures are not dealt with adequately).

Jeremiah 26 referred to the prophet Micah, whose words about the destruction of Jerusalem were efficacious in turning Hezekiah and the nation from their self-destructive ways. Micah fits the prophetic profile as defined by Jeremiah in 28:8–9. Here also is one (among several) criterion for interpreting prophecy that speaks volumes across the centuries. The voice that speaks for God takes seriously the failures of the people. It is the prophet who announces that "all will be well" whose word requires a literal fulfillment. Otherwise, God has not sent him or her, and the true prophet

should be about the business of uncovering the failures of God's people, holding them up to the light of day and thus demonstrating the possibility of judgment to come. Hananiah's death confirms his "lie."

Perhaps an instructive way to bridge the gap between the ancient setting and modern appropriation is to ask readers/hearers: With which of the prophets in the account do they identify? The question will not only require that they know something about the issues at stake for Jeremiah and Hananiah; it will also force them to account for why Hananiah is so adamant and sincere and why initially Jeremiah is open to considering his message.

Contemporary Significance

GOD'S WILL TO SAVE. Hananiah speaks forthrightly about God's sovereignty in a time of flux and uncertainty. According to this prophet from Gibeon, not only is the Lord of history capable of delivering his people from the hand of persecutors; it is his gracious desire to save them. Who would wish to quarrel with this? Certainly not Jeremiah! According to Jeremiah, Babylon is but a tool in the hands of the sovereign Lord, and when Babylon's appointed task is complete, its worldly hegemony will come to an end. Moreover, the Lord will redeem his people and bring them back from exile. Hananiah and Jeremiah could agree on these central tenets.

Furthermore, did not God later do what Hananiah predicted when he moved Cyrus to release the exiles and the temple vessels so that both could return to their rightful home? Who among God's people today would dispute Hananiah's basic affirmation that God would deliver Judah? In light of God's subsequent radical reach into human history, his encounter with human sinfulness in Christ, his costly dealings with human failure at the cross, and his glorious triumph over death itself in raising Christ from the dead, God demonstrates his resolve to save. Yes, Hananiah was right about God's will to save.

Who speaks the truth? One sees a strange paradox in the dispute between Hananiah and Jeremiah. Hananiah's certainty about the Lord is illtimed, while Jeremiah's human hesitation in light of Hananiah's initial prophecy is part of his care in listening for the Lord's leading. Such leading can and does come from prophetic voices, but how can one know who speaks the truth? In Hananiah's case, his certainty is ill-timed because he has failed to recognize the gravity of Judah's failures. Yes, his sense of God as strong Deliverer is accurate, but his sense of God's timing is wrong. Hananiah has an inadequate grasp of Judah's predicament before the Lord, and because of this he has an inadequate grasp of what the Lord of history intends in adopting Babylon as his historical agent.

Is Judah's predicament in 594/593 B.C. reflective of a mild miscalculation? Have the ongoing failures of Judah and the deportations of 597 been acknowledged by the people and dealt with adequately? Are the deportations of 597 the needed "slap on the wrist," the "mid-course correction" to set Judah again on the path of righteousness in relationship to her Lord, so that all that remains is God's liberation of the exiles and the temple vessels? No, unfortunately the true prophet sees that Judah has not comprehended adequately either its failures or the consequences of its failures, and the people as a whole have not been receptive to divine instruction. Hananiah is right to believe that God wants the return of his people, but his timing is wrong. In Christian terms, he wants to proclaim a resurrection without an acknowledgment of the necessity of the cross. Are there movements today within the church that "heal lightly the wound of the people"? The issue is not one of sincerity, but of truth.

An authentic prophet cannot overlook the barriers between what God has called his people to be and what they in their human fallibility actually represent. Wherever there is an automatic reliance on God's will to save without an acceptance of his refining judgments as a process of sanctification, there is the real possibility of misrepresenting God to any generation.

One is driven to ask about the state of the church in the modern West. It is on the decline in several areas. Should one think and pray and proclaim that renewal is just around the corner—that God is waiting to pour out his Spirit and to bless the church? Or should one think and pray and proclaim that God will (continue to?) give the church over to its self-incurred failures until some disaster or another has prepared the church to hear again the good news? Perhaps it is not wise to choose strictly between the two options, since God may have both judgment and renewal working mysteriously hand in hand. Nevertheless, we should look carefully for the modern-day Hananiahs because they do exist.

Jeremiah 29:1–32

THIS IS THE text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ²(This was after King Jehoiachin and the queen mother, the court officials and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen and the artisans had gone into exile from Jerusalem.) ³He entrusted the letter to Elasah son of Shaphan and to Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. It said:

⁴This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5"Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. ⁷Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." ⁸Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams vou encourage them to have. ⁹They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them," declares the LORD.

¹⁰This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹²Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile."

¹⁵You may say, "The LORD has raised up prophets for us in Babylon," ¹⁶but this is what the LORD says about the king who sits on David's throne and all the people who remain in this city, your countrymen who did not go with you into exile—¹⁷ves, this is what the LORD Almighty says: "I will send the sword, famine and plague against them and I will make them like poor figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten. ¹⁸I will pursue them with the sword, famine and plague and will make them abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth and an object of cursing and horror, of scorn and reproach, among all the nations where I drive them. ¹⁹For they have not listened to my words," declares the LORD, "words that I sent to them again and again by my servants the prophets. And you exiles have not listened either," declares the LORD.

²⁰Therefore, hear the word of the LORD, all you exiles whom I have sent away from Jerusalem to Babylon. ²¹This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says about Ahab son of Kolaiah and Zedekiah son of Maaseiah, who are prophesying lies to you in my name: "I will hand them over to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and he will put them to death before your very eyes. ²²Because of them, all the exiles from Judah who are in Babylon will use this curse: 'The LORD treat you like Zedekiah and Ahab, whom the king of Babylon burned in the fire.' ²³For they have done outrageous things in Israel; they have committed adultery with their neighbors' wives and in my name have spoken lies, which I did not tell them to do. I know it and am a witness to it," declares the LORD.

²⁴Tell Shemaiah the Nehelamite, ²⁵"This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: You sent letters in your own name to all the people in Jerusalem, to Zephaniah son of Maaseiah the priest, and to all the other priests. You said to Zephaniah, ²⁶'The LORD has appointed you priest in place of Jehoiada to be in charge of the house of the LORD; you should put any madman who acts like a prophet into the stocks and neck-irons. ²⁷So why have you not reprimanded Jeremiah from Anathoth, who poses as a prophet among you? ²⁸He has sent this

message to us in Babylon: It will be a long time. Therefore build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce."

²⁹Zephaniah the priest, however, read the letter to Jeremiah the prophet. ³⁰Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: ³¹"Send this message to all the exiles: 'This is what the LORD says about Shemaiah the Nehelamite: Because Shemaiah has prophesied to you, even though I did not send him, and has led you to believe a lie, ³²this is what the LORD says: I will surely punish Shemaiah the Nehelamite and his descendants. He will have no one left among this people, nor will he see the good things I will do for my people, declares the LORD, because he has preached rebellion against me."

Original Meaning

29:1–3. CHAPTER 29 IS LINKED with the previous chapter by literary proximity, historical context, and common vocabulary. As these first three verses make clear, Jeremiah writes a letter to the Judean community in Babylonian exile, that is, to those Judeans taken into exile with Jehoiachin¹ in 597 B.C. Although much of the chapter is taken up with the substance of that letter, it contains references to other messages that have gone back and forth from the two communities of Judeans. Jeremiah entrusts his letter to the Judeans in Babylon to Elasah the son of Shaphan (presumably the brother of Ahikam, who had earlier kept Jeremiah from the lynch mob)² and to Gemariah the son of Hilkiah the priest—two official Judean messengers (ambassadors?) sent by Zedekiah to Babylon on state business.

Several prophets and diviners among the Judean exiles have provoked the community with announcements of the imminent demise of Babylon and a return of the exiles to Judah (29:8–9, 15, 21–28). They are like Hananiah (ch. 28) in their orientation. Some of the agitators are named (Ahab and Zedekiah, 29:21–22; Shemaiah, 29:24), although nothing else is preserved about them beside what is contained in this chapter. Most likely they are prominent figures among the exiles. Shemaiah, for example, has

communicated directly with the priest named Zephaniah, who is in charge of the house of the Lord in Jerusalem (29:25–26). These figures show awareness that Jeremiah's prophecies are known in Babylon.

The prophet's letter reinforces his previous prophecies that God has granted Babylon hegemony, that the duration of Babylonian sovereignty has decades to run (cf. 25:12), and that only then will there be restoration (cf. 24:6–7). What is new in chapter 29 is the instruction to settle down in Babylon and to pray for the city. The exiles are to "seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" (29:7).³

Chapter 29 contains the same charges against the exilic prophets as was made against Hananiah in chapter 28. They cause the people to trust in a lie (28:15; 29:9, 21, 23, 31; cf. 7:4),⁴ and their words are, in effect, rebellion against the Lord (29:31–32; cf. 28:15–16). Jeremiah's struggle against prophets who prophesy falsely in the Lord's name extends even to the exilic community. The book of Ezekiel carries on this struggle to present the exilic community with God's word.

29:4–9. The first line of the letter contains a shocking truth, but it points to the good news to follow. God is the subject of the phrase "all those *I* carried into exile." Of course, the previous verses noted that Nebuchadnezzar was the historical agent who took the people into exile, but in verse 4 the theological point is made that it is actually the work of God himself. The affirmation is followed by the commands to settle down in exile and to carry out such functions of sedentary existence as building, planting, and marriage. Exile is not the end of existence as God's people, but the beginning of a new phase of relating to God. The people are not to rebel against the authority of Babylon because, in effect, it is the authority of God over them for a prescribed time. More positively, the people are to seek the prosperity of Babylon because it will affect them as well. Most important, they are to pray for their captors.

29:10–14. These hopeful verses help prepare readers for the section that follows in the prophetic book, a section known to interpreters as the Book of Consolation. Jeremiah notes that the future of the people in exile rests on God's "gracious promise" (v. 10; lit., God's "good word"). In verse 11 the gracious promise is described as plans God has for the people, plans for a "prosperity" (*šalom*, peace) that provides a future and "hope" (*tiqwa*). A

tangible element to the future consists in the restoration of the people to their homeland. The restoration, however, is predicated on their seeking God with their whole heart.

29:15–23. Certain prophets are agitating among the exiles in Babylon. From the message about judgment on the king and people who remain in Judah, one infers that these prophetic agitators believe no more disaster will befall Judah and Jerusalem. Jeremiah describes God as making King Zedekiah and the people in Jerusalem like "poor figs that ... cannot be eaten" (29:17). This metaphor is the same one as given to Jeremiah in 24:1–10. Because the king in Jerusalem and his people refuse to acknowledge God's judgment and refuse to embrace his covenant stipulations, they will be given over to the disasters of the sword and plague. The last part of this section warns the exiles not to listen to these prophetic agitators.

29:24–32. A particular opponent of Jeremiah, Shemaiah the Nehelamite, is singled out for criticism and announced judgment. He is a prophet who has proclaimed lies to the people in exile. He will not, therefore, see the "good things" that God will do for the people because he has "preached rebellion" against God (v. 32). This last element is the same charge leveled against Hananiah in 28:16.⁵

Bridging Contexts

God's people taken into exile. While his influence was profound in the decades after the final destruction of Jerusalem (through his book!), he also communicated to the early exiles via letters during the interim between the first deportation in 597 B.C. and the demise of the city in 587/586. The book of Jeremiah exhibits concern for the exiles in a variety of ways, since a broad goal is to demonstrate that Jeremiah is a true prophet to the nations (including the exiles and Babylon itself). Thus chapter 29 finds itself in the broader context of prophetic texts from Isaiah and Ezekiel that address the city-state of Babylon and the Judean exiles there.

This chapter also finds itself a part of the scriptural witness to God's people who are addressed as pilgrims, as wandering people, even as aliens, whose true home is with the Lord. From the perspective of the New Testament, God's people are both "at home" as members of the body of the

risen Christ (regardless of their geographical location) and "in transit" as they live out their witness in this age (regardless of their geographical location). The exiles in Babylon have not been ejected from their place among God's people; rather, they have been called to reconsider their place in God's economy in light of new temporal circumstances. Here potentially is a bridge to any generation of God's people.

Prayers for Babylon. It is helpful to see the letter of Jeremiah in the context of the New Testament letters. Paul and other apostles wrote to congregations about particular matters of the faith. From their remarks later readers can discern something of the debates of the congregations, the dynamics of their ministries, and the other voices that claimed divine inspiration.

Likewise Jeremiah writes to a specific situation in Babylon and offers faithful instruction in light of what he knows to be God's will for the common life of the exiles. He urges prayer for the welfare of Babylon and efforts toward the care for families because there will be no quick return from exile. He assures the exiles that God has not forgotten them or become subservient to the power of Babylon. Temporal submission to Babylon is submission to the work of God, who brought them to Babylon in the first place. The exiles should ignore the self-proclaimed prophets who stir the community with their rhetoric but have not been sent by God.

With the injunction to pray for Babylon, readers encounter an Old Testament form of Jesus' teaching (Matt. 5:43–48) to pray for one's enemies. Jeremiah's instruction to pray does not assume a generic prayer to be transported whole cloth from one setting in the life of God's people to another. It assumes that God has spoken definitively about Babylon's role in the divine economy so that his people located there should pray accordingly and live accordingly. It also assumes that the "enemy" is not simply an opponent and that the exiles are not simply victims.

In a perverse sort of way, the exiles might become comfortable thinking of themselves only as victims and the Babylonians only as the enemy. If so, the exiles would not go through the self-examination process that was necessary. If the Babylonians were only the "enemy," then they could be blamed for all of Judah's failures. Instead, the exiles should pray for Babylon because it is their home and because in the near future, the fate of Babylon will be the fate of the people as well. God will continue to use the

enemy to instruct his people. Perhaps the people will offer some witness to the "enemy" and thereby lead to another aspect of God's instruction—to be a light to the nations (Isa. 42:6; 49:6; 51:4).

God's plans. In a justly famous "reminder" the prophet writes that God knows the plans that he has for the exiles—plans for a future, for hope, and for restoration (29:11–14). The first context in which to hear these words comes in the next two chapters of Jeremiah's book, where future hope and restoration in the Promised Land are given fuller expression. The same kind of confidence in God's saving purposes is available to any generation of his people who, as Jeremiah writes, seek him "with all [their] heart" (29:13).

Contemporary Significance

To pray or not to pray? If that is the question for Christians, then the book of Jeremiah offers some surprising answers. On occasion Jeremiah is enjoined by the Lord not to pray for his people because they are intransigent and for the moment irredeemable (7:16; 11:14; 14:11). This somber communication is not, of course, for Jeremiah's private consumption; instead, this word of the Lord becomes part of his public proclamation, designed to shock and to evoke change. The people's time is up and the consequences of failure will be severe. But what about the enemy? Surely God's people should pray for the defeat of their enemies, shouldn't they? Otherwise, they themselves will be overtaken. "Not so this time," says Jeremiah about Babylon.

There are some surprising things to be learned from and experienced through prayer. Such is the rich testimony of Scripture and saints alike. As a general rule, communities and individuals who do not regularly pray indicate by this that they do not have an adequate theology. The command for Jeremiah not to pray is thus a special case and comes as a radical illustration of the spiritual deadness of the people. Fervent prayer means confidence in God and an openness to his surprising leading. Prayer is a form of applied theology. The issue here is not belief in God, but communion with God through prayer. The devil and his assistants do not pray to God, but they believe in his existence.

Prayer is not for the benefit of God, although both praise and petition belong in a relationship with God. Prayer changes both the perceptions of those who pray and their actions. Surely this is the case in ancient Babylon. As Judeans pray for the welfare of the city, God's people will learn that no one is only an enemy. In the case of Babylon, their doom is sure to come, but in a radical way God has bound the fortunes of his people with their enemy. There is something profound at work in such circumstances. What comes with clarity in the gospel is already adumbrated in the Old Testament. Through prayer one can look at opponents or problems as more than someone or something to be overcome. They can become also a means of education and sanctification, the agents through whom one finds growth in relationship with God.

Praying for peace. "Their peace is your peace." Certainly the tremendous changes in relations between East and West—the end of the so-called "cold war"—is an illustration of this truth. The fall of the Iron Curtain and the dissolution of the Soviet empire in the last few years has brought home to millions in the East and West that the "other" is not necessarily an enemy. Subsequently it has become clear that in the prosperity of the one lies the prosperity of the other. For Christians in both East and West this truth hits home with particular force. As former enemies now seek a better coexistence, Christians on both sides can see that God has done more than instruct them about an enemy—there is now a foundation for a new community of faith. Praying for the "other" has changed those who pray as surely as it has affected the "other."

How many tensions would be alleviated, how many problems set on the road to solution, if Christians would pray for the welfare of their opponents? Prayer for an opponent does not forbid action that may keep each other in relational tension. It does not guarantee a solution. But since prayer is applied theology, it will change one's attitude toward opponents.

Prayer is the bedrock of confidence in God. It was in Jeremiah's day, and it remains a key to seeking God with all one's heart. God's promises are freely given, but not all of them can be freely accepted—that is, they have little relevancy to an indifferent people. For those in dire straits, it should come as good news that God knows the future and is committed to the redemption of his people. "Seek and you will find" (Matt. 7:7) is the Lord's gracious command, not "resign and do nothing."

Interspersed in the scriptural word of Jeremiah 29 are indications of particular judgment on individuals. It is important for Christians to

remember that judgment is God's affair. Jeremiah does not take judgment into his own hands, nor does he urge others to do so. He simply notes that the work of people like Ahab, Zedekiah, and Shemaiah is opposed to the purposes of God and that God will deal with them.

Jeremiah 30–33

Introduction to Jeremiah 30–33

THESE FOUR CHAPTERS comprise a distinct subsection in Jeremiah. They are not, however, a simple unity. Chapters 30–31 are largely poetry, while 32–33 are prose. Chapters 30–31 are often called by interpreters the "Book of Consolation" or the "Book of Hope" because they contain proclamations of Israel and Judah's restoration to the Promised Land. Restoration—or better said, the creation of a new relationship with the Lord—is also central here. The same restoration-oriented hope is part of chapters 32–33, so that their interpretation is linked with the two previous chapters. Nevertheless, no concrete setting in Jeremiah's ministry is given for the proclamation of chapters 30–31 (see below) as there is with chapters 32–33. The latter are set in the last days of the Judean state (587 B.C.), the tenth year of Zedekiah and the eighteenth of Nebuchadnezzar (32:1; 33:1).

Since there is a range of interpretive possibilities regarding Jeremiah's future hope, it is best to list the most common of them and to comment on them briefly at the outset of this subsection. Individual details are discussed more fully with the specific chapter.

(1) Some modern interpreters have concluded that major portions of the hopeful prophecies in the book originated not with Jeremiah but with his editors in the later exilic period, as deported Judeans looked for the possibility of restoration to their homeland.² According to some proponents of this view, the historical Jeremiah was essentially a prophet of doom, or an individual so far removed from the book that bears his name that the origin of most of these restoration prophecies comes from people in exile (and perhaps even in the postexilic period) who hoped for future change.

One may begin a response with the affirmation that there is no reason, a priori, why those who edited and produced the book of Jeremiah could not also have contributed prophecies to the finished product. After all, if God can call Jeremiah as a prophet, then God can also use editors! The question is simply one of evaluating the relevant evidence for secondary material and weighing the balance of probability.

As noted in the introduction, it seems more likely to the present writer that Jeremiah's circle of supporters reworked and updated material that originated with the prophet himself, and less likely that some of the most creative and compelling material in all the book originated with these anonymous laborers. Perhaps this circle of supporters even had the assistance of the prophet himself in the earlier stages of editing before the book reached its final form. As editors, this circle would have arranged the material in line with the hope enunciated by Jeremiah himself, even if the sequencing of materials and the final form of the book came after the prophet's death.

Clearly the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of many of Judah's inhabitants impact the entire book of Jeremiah, including the hopeful oracles in chapters 30–33. In final form the restoration texts in this section are addressed to those Judeans who lived after Judah's demise and Jerusalem's destruction. In addressing a future hope for God's people, this Book of Consolation points beyond judgment and geographic restoration to an even grander future renewal (cf. [3], below).

(2) Some interpreters have deduced from the various references to Israel, Samaria, Jacob, Rachel, and Ephraim in chapters 30–31 that these chapters contain elements of the young Jeremiah's preaching to the northern territories taken earlier by the Assyrians.³ As with the previous view, the application of historical analysis has led some to claim precise settings for the origins of particular oracles within the two chapters.

In this view, some of the "hopeful" prophecies originated early in Jeremiah's prophetic ministry⁴ as addresses to the northern territories rather than (as in the first view) with editors in the exilic period. Apparently Josiah sought to reincorporate parts of the northern territory and population in his religious and political reforms (2 Chron. 34:29–33; 35:16–18), and it is certainly plausible to see the young Jeremiah as a supporter of these goals. After all, the prophetic hope is founded on a belief that the full complement of God's people could never be limited solely to Judah. Thus the northern territory and its inhabitants are among the people addressed in these two chapters along with Judah (who can be addressed separately).

The question here is whether the restoration of the northern territories (i.e., Israel, Ephraim) was originally addressed separately during an early period of Jeremiah's career or only in the period after 609 B.C., when the announcements of Judah's imminent demise were also delivered and both Israel and Judah were no more than remnants of their former political

entities. Some of the material in Jeremiah 30–31 would fit well in the late seventh century as Josiah instituted his reforms, but since the impact of the Judean exile is also in view, perhaps it is better to view this entire section as the result of a topical collection (i.e., prophecies of restoration) that dates from different periods in Jeremiah's ministry and that was updated and set in a broader literary context in the process of preservation.⁵

Like many of the judgment prophecies in chapters 1–20, which in written form are removed from a precise historical context and now function more broadly to explain the demise of Judah, the restoration prophecies in chapters 30–31 are now somewhat isolated from an original historical context and function as indications of the mercy of God and his power to transform both the near and the distant future.

(3) As with all true prophecy, predictions about the future are intended to effect change in the hearers as well as inform them about the future. In light of the comments above (see [2]), the collection of prophecies in chapters 30–31 is actually the prediction of a new world, that is, a new age and a new time unlike that known to the hearers. It includes restoration of exiles from Assyrian and Babylonian territories, surely a hopeful and gracious word to Jeremiah's contemporaries.

But there is more to the prophetic depictions of a new world than that, for nothing less than an ideal community (a new Jerusalem and new David) and a fully realized covenant relationship with God are announced. Such predictions, therefore, gave content to the hope for national healing in the postexilic period and also served as the beginnings of a new community in a restored Jerusalem. At the same time, the prophecies point beyond those marvelous "beginnings" to a day and time qualitatively different from either the postexilic period or that of the contemporary reader.

The new world envisioned in chapters 30–33 is indeed far grander and more sublime than the communities of faith formed after the Exile. Stated somewhat differently, the Jews of the exilic and postexilic periods would not see the significance of chapters 30–31 exhausted in the return to Judea from Babylon. God has yet more to accomplish with and through his people. The future depicted in these chapters still has hopes as yet unrealized. At a fundamental level this puts modern readers in a similar context to that of the first hearers/readers: All alike wait in anticipation of the fuller realization of God's grand design.

Ultimately chapters 30–31 are eschatological in nature, depicting in the language and thought-forms of the day a prophecy that God will gain ultimate victory over alienation and sin. The postexilic restoration was the firstfruits of the promises, the prelude to and a type of the greater restoration to come. In light of Christ's first advent, the New Testament provides further guidance on the significance of these prophecies; nevertheless, modern Christians still await (in hope, just like their spiritual ancestors of Jeremiah's day) the final consummation of the new world glimpsed by Jeremiah. Here is a perspective that places the current generation of God's people in a mode of expectation similar to that of Jeremiah's own day.

Modern Christians may find an instructive analogy in the eschatological discourse of Jesus with his disciples (Matt. 24; Mark 13; Luke 21). The destruction of Jerusalem and conflict in the region after Jesus' death are graphically depicted, but so are the hardships and threats sure to afflict believers in subsequent years. Moreover, these predictions do more than simply depict the Roman devastation of the region, for they point beyond that imminent tragedy to the difficulties expected at the end of the age. Jeremiah 30–31 can be interpreted similarly—the turning of God's judgment is seen in the restoration from the Exile, but these things point beyond to a restoration yet to be fully realized.

The New Testament is reticent about a final restoration of Israel (cf. Acts 1:6–8). That "all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26) is affirmed, quite apart from defining more closely who that Israel will be (ethnic/national? modern state? Jews who eventually accept Jesus as the Messiah?). Interpreters, therefore, differ on the question of interpreting Old Testament promises of Israel's restoration and transformation. Are they inherited by the church and thus reach their eschatological fulfillment through it, or do they represent a fulfillment to come for "Israel" that is distinct from the future promised for the church?

This is a much bigger question than that of interpreting Jeremiah 30–33, but the basic stance of interpreting Jeremiah is the same as that for other eschatological texts in the prophetic corpus. As indicated in the introduction to this commentary, the author opts for fulfillment in and through the church. This is based on the conviction that there is no other eternal connection of God's people to him except that which has been founded

through Christ's cross and resurrection. Readers are invited to investigate the resources listed in the introduction for further study and to examine carefully the comments in the Bridging Contexts and Contemporary Significance for chapter 31.

Jeremiah 30:1-24

¹This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²"This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Write in a book all the words I have spoken to you. ³The days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will bring my people Israel and Judah back from captivity and restore them to the land I gave their forefathers to possess,' says the LORD."

⁴These are the words the LORD spoke concerning Israel and Judah: ⁵"This is what the LORD says:

"'Cries of fear are heard—terror, not peace.

⁶Ask and see:

Can a man bear children?
Then why do I see every strong man with his hands on his stomach like a woman in labor, every face turned deathly pale?

Thow awful that day will be!
None will be like it.
It will be a time of trouble for Jacob, but he will be saved out of it.

8""In that day,' declares the LORD Almighty,
'I will break the yoke off their necks and will tear off their bonds;
no longer will foreigners enslave them.

9Instead, they will serve the LORD their God

and David their king, whom I will raise up for them.

10""So do not fear, O Jacob my servant; do not be dismayed, O Israel,

declares the LORD.

'I will surely save you out of a distant place,

your descendants from the land of their exile.

Jacob will again have peace and security, and no one will make him afraid.

¹¹I am with you and will save you,' declares the LORD.

'Though I completely destroy all the nations among which I scatter you, I will not completely destroy you. I will discipline you but only with justice; I will not let you go entirely unpunished.'

12"This is what the LORD says:

"Your wound is incurable, your injury beyond healing.

¹³There is no one to plead your cause, no remedy for your sore, no healing for you.

¹⁴All your allies have forgotten you; they care nothing for you.

I have struck you as an enemy would and punished you as would the cruel, because your guilt is so great and your sins so many.

15Why do you cry out over your wound, your pain that has no cure?

Because of your great guilt and many sins

I have done these things to you.

16"But all who devour you will be devoured;
all your enemies will go into exile.
Those who plunder you will be plundered;
all who make spoil of you I will despoil.

¹⁷But I will restore you to health and heal your wounds,'

declares the LORD, 'because you are called an outcast,
Zion for whom no one cares.'

¹⁸"This is what the LORD says:

"I will restore the fortunes of Jacob's tents and have compassion on his dwellings; the city will be rebuilt on her ruins, and the palace will stand in its proper place.

19 From them will come songs of thanksgiving and the sound of rejoicing.
I will add to their numbers, and they will not be decreased;
I will bring them honor, and they will not be disdained.
20 Their children will be as in days

20 Their children will be as in days of old, and their community will be established before me;
I will punish all who oppress them.

²¹Their leader will be one of their own; their ruler will arise from among them.

I will bring him near and he will come close to me,

for who is he who will devote himself to be close to me?'

declares the LORD.

22"So you will be my people, and I will be your God."

23See, the storm of the LORD will burst out in wrath,
a driving wind swirling down on the heads of the wicked.
24The fierce anger of the LORD will not turn back until he fully accomplishes the purposes of his heart.
In days to come you will understand this."

Original Meaning

30:1–3. Although the text does not provide a specific setting for these prophecies in Jeremiah's life, the command in 30:2 to write them in a scroll suggests that they are to stand as instruction and witness for the future. The summary statement in 30:3 uses a typical prophetic introduction for predictions of future change—"the days are coming" (cf. 30:8, 24). The primary claim about the future is that the affliction of "Jacob" (30:7, 10, 18) will be removed and the people will be restored to their land and to a better relationship with God. Apparently "Jacob" is a covenant term for God's people that includes both Israel and Judah (30:4). In the restoration God will raise up "David their king" (30:9). Jerusalem also is addressed in 30:12–17.

These prophecies presuppose a unity to God's people that transcends their current political and geographical circumstances. Not only are there predictions that Israel and Judah will be restored to their land and that God will raise up for them a king from David's line, but the restoration of Zion (= Jerusalem) is also predicted (30:17–18). Moreover, Jeremiah announces

a restoration of the covenant relationship between God and his people that assumes a unity for that people (30:22; 31:1; cf. 32:38).

- **30:4–7.** This portion of chapter 30 is a bit cryptic with respect to the future turmoil it presupposes. A rhetorical question in verse 6 suggests that the dismay on the part of human beings will not be permanent. The point is that Jacob will be saved from a time of trouble.
- 30:8–11. The introductory phrase "in that day" is a rhetorical device used by prophets to speak of a decisive time in the future. Yokes and bonds will be removed from Jacob, and the people will no longer be enslaved by foreigners. By "David their king" is most likely meant someone from David's line. Such a hope is drawn from texts like 2 Samuel 7 and prophetic texts that rely on God's promised fidelity to the Davidic line. Since no king from David's line ruled Jacob in the postexilic period, this hope finds its ultimate fulfillment in the New Testament proclamation that Jesus is David's greater Son (cf. Matt. 1:1–17; Luke 1:26–33; Rom. 1:3), not in the leadership of the restored community in the Persian period.

The injunction "do not fear," addressed to Jacob as God's "servant" (v. 10), reminds the reader of the exilic prophecies in the book of Isaiah (Isa. 41:8–10; 43:1–7; 44:1–5; 54:4). The nations among whom Jacob has been exiled are subject to judgment. Jacob too has received judgment, but his judgment has been disciplinary in form. A day of reckoning still awaits the nations.

- **30:12–17.** In these verses humiliated Jerusalem is addressed. The description of her guilt and her helplessness remind the reader/hearer of the book of Lamentations. Judgmental language predominates in these verses, but its effects on Jerusalem are not without merciful limits. There is also announcement that Zion's enemies will be destroyed and that the city will be restored.
- 30:18–22. The announcement that Zion will be restored continues in the proclamation that Jacob's fortunes will be reconstituted. That Jacob and Zion are closely related can be seen from verse 18b. There is also an allusion to future leadership that will spring up from among the people (v. 21). The concluding verse reiterates the covenant formula (cf. 24:7). Restoration above all is a restoration of the relationship between God and his people.

30:23–24. This surprising section puts the future under the claim of God's righteous judgment and also in the context of divine intentions that cannot be fully grasped. The final verse (v. 24) is cryptic. Only the future (lit., "in the latter days") will reveal the extent of God's purposes in restoring Jacob and in punishing iniquity, for God's intentions to judge iniquity are most certainly part of the future when his people are "restored."

Thus, the earliest recipients of these prophecies are informed that the full significance of these prophecies will only be realized at considerable distance from their time of origin. Perhaps this last verse should be read together with verses 1–2: The cryptic words of chapter 30 will be preserved in a book to serve not only as a witness from the past, but also as inspired prediction about a future where God will judge human iniquity, a future not yet fully understood or realized by Jeremiah's contemporaries. The full impact of these predictions will best be seen at the conclusion of God's intended future.

As noted in the introduction to the hopeful prophecies in chapters 30–33, some scholars have denied that the same Jeremiah who so consistently announced judgment could simply switch directions and announce, like Hananiah in chapter 28, that God's restoring activity was on the historical horizon. These scholars speculate that these verses and others like them in Jeremiah must come from editors in the exilic and postexilic period who wished to supplement Jeremiah's words for the next generation.

But let's note again that these are not the only words of hope in Jeremiah's book. Why could not Jeremiah himself have understood God to be both a righteous Judge and the One who intends to restore a chastened and punished people? We must acknowledge, however, that neither in this chapter nor elsewhere in the book are we provided with enough detail to reconstruct when Jeremiah first announced that God would restore his people after a time of judgment. His reaction in his encounter with Hananiah demonstrates that he was open to the fresh and surprising word of the Lord that would move beyond the necessary corrective judgment to the healing balm of restoration. Since the contents of Jeremiah are not arranged chronologically, it apparently was not important for later readers to have a chronology of his theological development; it was sufficient merely to

indicate topically and thematically that the prophet announced both judgment and restoration as the work of the same Lord.

Bridging Contexts

GOD AND THE FUTURE. The chapter contains prophecies that range into the near future and into the far future from the perspective of Jeremiah's contemporaries. This realization helps us with interpreting the texts. Regarding the near future, God worked through the historical process to overcome the power of Babylon and to provide a way for his exiled people to return to their ancestral land. With the rise of Cyrus the Persian, later known as Cyrus the Great, a different political order was established in the latter half of the sixth century B.C. Under the leadership of Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel, several groups of Jews made their way back to the land of promise. They began the process of rebuilding the temple complex and their lives (Ezra 1–3).

These people were not free from Persian control, but they laid more than a physical foundation; along with the preaching of prophets like Haggai and Zechariah, they also laid a spiritual foundation for greater renewal to come. The unfortunate breach between the returnees and many of the other inhabitants of the area (particularly those led by Sanballat, the governor of the province of Samaria) meant that reconciliation between the descendants of Israel and Judah was not accomplished. Nevertheless, elements of Jeremiah 30 find fulfillment in the miraculous ways in which life in Jerusalem and Judah were restored after the Babylonian exile.

The chapter as a whole indicates avenues through which God's announced intent in chapter 1 "to uproot and tear down" and "to build and to plant" is actualized. Restoration took place in the postexilic period, but this example of God's faithfulness does not exhaust the claims of chapter 30. There is also the indication that God's people should not forget the necessity of a righteous judgment and that they should recognize their own inadequacies in healing their own failures. Such claims give subsequent generations of God's people cause for reflection as they ask: Are there still ways in which we exhibit failure and incur judgment?

A claim like that addressed to Zion in 30:12 ("your wound is incurable") pushes past a mere historical reading to interrogate any generation. It is a

theology at one with a later biblical claim of death apart from divine grace (Eph. 2:1; Col. 2:13). The conclusion to Jeremiah 30 points further forward to a time (times?) of broad reckoning, where God will judge iniquity on a wider scale. Such language calls any generation of God's people to anticipate more from the Lord of history.

Chapter 30 also predicts the restoration of the covenant relationship between God and his people (30:22). This claim should cause current readers to reflect on the centuries that have passed since these words were first proclaimed. Subsequent biblical history and that of the church are evidence that God still pursues this goal among his people. In Christ God has bound himself to his people and provided all the means necessary to overcome their failures. The future remains open to a greater fulfillment of these words, just as it was for Jeremiah's contemporaries.

Contemporary Significance

ESCHATOLOGY. WHAT DOES the future hold for the church and the world in which it carries out its ministry? Theologians use the term *eschatology* to describe the expectations about the end of the age. As these words are being written, there is much in the popular culture about transition to a new millennium. The year 2000 is popularly understood as the beginning of a new millennium (even though it is actually the end of a century and also the end of a millennium). Does this transition year bring us closer to *the Millennium* on earth, or is that scriptural hope best understood through the life of the Spirit in the church of Jesus Christ? As always, the future will be the best vantage point from which to see the significance of the present! At a distance from the pressure of the "now," the puzzles of the present begin to show new meaning.

Sociologists chart the strange behaviors that often come at transition po ts such as a new year. Some of it is lawless or antisocial, and some of it is the nervousness that comes with the times, even if such nervousness lies below the conscious surface. This was especially true of the transition to the year 2000, which was a milestone as modern people measure time. But what about God's ways of evaluating the state of the world and of working out his ultimate purposes? One wonders if each new year has any particular significance in God's scheme.

God's faithfulness, present and future. Yes, eschatological speculation will be profitable in the near future, but will it be helpful for the church? A glance at biblical prophecy confirms that God has been faithful to his promises, but his faithfulness comes in surprising ways. It is true that God announced through prophets both the exile of his people and their return. But the return did not usher in the final age. God also announced that a new David would come to lead the people, but not everyone could accept that Jesus was the fulfillment of this hope. In this regard, oftentimes it is at some distance that people of faith can see more clearly what God has done. Perhaps what is more important for people of faith today is to concentrate on the "constants" in the eschatological prophecy of the Bible rather than on a blueprint mentality that believes it can "figure out the future in advance."

What are some of those constants? One is certainly that God is the Judge of all people. In addition, God has called a people into fellowship and has promised to be their God. These two things will not change, whether something in the year 2000 makes it a special year or not. A typical year is one in which God judges and purifies a people in various ways. If 2000 and beyond are typical years, then they will reveal many small fulfillments of the greater purpose God has given in Scripture and has not yet brought to culmination. When all is finally accomplished, it will be more clear. The church is called every year to have expectation and hope. God has indicated the shape of prophetic hope for all time in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow (Heb. 13:8).

During the last week of 1999 the present writer watched a few people load up their cars and trailers and head out to the rural areas of Texas. They did so because they feared the apocalyptic changes that might be ushered in with the coming of the new year. What was it about the biblical message that so frightened them? Most likely it was the expectation that if the end of history is coming, it would have disastrous proportions (cf., e.g., Matt. 24; Mark 13). All of us should be reminded that when the end is near, whether it is accompanied by the death throes of civilization or not, the consistent teaching of the biblical text is that God will save his people.

Jesus told his disciples to watch for the signs of the times; that is good advice in any situation. It is certainly so with the concern about the future: Watch for signs of the times. The ultimate shape of the future, however, can

be discerned from those things that Scripture constantly espouses: God is working out his near and far purposes to judge iniquity, to redeem a people, and to create a new world where death and sin are banished. Maranatha!

Jeremiah 31:1-40

1"At that time," declares the LORD, "I will be the God of all the clans of Israel, and they will be my people."

²This is what the LORD says:

"The people who survive the sword will find favor in the desert; I will come to give rest to Israel."

³The LORD appeared to us in the past, saying:

"I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with lovingkindness.

⁴I will build you up again and you will be rebuilt, O Virgin Israel.

Again you will take up your tambourines and go out to dance with the joyful.

⁵Again you will plant vineyards on the hills of Samaria; the farmers will plant them and enjoy their fruit.

⁶There will be a day when watchmen cry out on the hills of Ephraim,

'Come, let us go up to Zion, to the LORD our God.'"

⁷This is what the LORD says:

"Sing with joy for Jacob;

shout for the foremost of the nations.

Make your praises heard, and say,
'O LORD, save your people,
the remnant of Israel.'

⁸See, I will bring them from the land of the north

and gather them from the ends of the earth.

Among them will be the blind and the lame,

expectant mothers and women in labor;

a great throng will return.

⁹They will come with weeping; they will pray as I bring them back.

I will lead them beside streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble,

because I am Israel's father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son.

¹⁰"Hear the word of the LORD, O nations; proclaim it in distant coastlands:

'He who scattered Israel will gather them and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.'

¹¹For the LORD will ransom Jacob and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they.

¹²They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion;

they will rejoice in the bounty of the LORD—

the grain, the new wine and the oil, the young of the flocks and herds. They will be like a well-watered garden, and they will sorrow no more. 13Then maidens will dance and be glad, young men and old as well.
I will turn their mourning into gladness;
I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow.

¹⁴I will satisfy the priests with abundance, and my people will be filled with my bounty,"

declares the LORD.

¹⁵This is what the LORD says:

"A voice is heard in Ramah,
mourning and great weeping,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because her children are no more."

¹⁶This is what the LORD says:

"Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded," declares the LORD.

"They will return from the land of the enemy.

¹⁷So there is hope for your future," declares the LORD.

"Your children will return to their own land.

18"I have surely heard Ephraim's moaning:
'You disciplined me like an unruly calf, and I have been disciplined.
Restore me, and I will return,

because you are the LORD my God.

19 After I strayed,
I repented;
after I came to understand,
I beat my breast.

I was ashamed and humiliated
because I bore the disgrace of my
youth.'

20 Is not Ephraim my dear son,
the child in whom I delight?

Though I often speak against him,
I still remember him.

Therefore my heart yearns for him;
I have great compassion for him,"

21"Set up road signs;
put up guideposts.
Take note of the highway,
the road that you take.
Return, O Virgin Israel,
return to your towns.
22How long will you wander,
O unfaithful daughter?
The LORD will create a new thing on earth

declares the LORD.

a woman will surround a man."

²³This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "When I bring them back from captivity, the people in the land of Judah and in its towns will once again use these words: 'The LORD bless you, O righteous dwelling, O sacred mountain.' ²⁴People will live together in Judah and all its towns—farmers and those who move about with their flocks. ²⁵I will refresh the weary and satisfy the faint."

²⁶At this I awoke and looked around. My sleep had been pleasant to me.

²⁷"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will plant the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the offspring of men and of animals. ²⁸Just as I watched over them to uproot and tear down, and to overthrow, destroy and bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant," declares the LORD. ²⁹"In those days people will no longer say,

'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.'

³⁰Instead, everyone will die for his own sin; whoever eats sour grapes—his own teeth will be set on edge.

31"The time is coming," declares the LORD,
"when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.

32 It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD.

33"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD.
"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God, and they will be my people.

³⁴No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,'

because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD.

"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

35This is what the LORD says,

he who appoints the sun
to shine by day,
who decrees the moon and stars
to shine by night,
who stirs up the sea
so that its waves roar—
the LORD Almighty is his name:

36"Only if these decrees vanish from my
sight,"
declares the LORD,

"will the descendants of Israel ever cease
to be a nation before me."

³⁷This is what the LORD says:

"Only if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below be searched out will I reject all the descendants of Israel because of all they have done," declares the LORD.

³⁸"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when this city will be rebuilt for me from the Tower

of Hananel to the Corner Gate. ³⁹The measuring line will stretch from there straight to the hill of Gareb and then turn to Goah. ⁴⁰The whole valley where dead bodies and ashes are thrown, and all the terraces out to the Kidron Valley on the east as far as the corner of the Horse Gate, will be holy to the LORD. The city will never again be uprooted or demolished."

Original Meaning

31:1 POETIC DEPICTIONS of the future continue from chapter 30. Verse 1—likely a summary of the chapter's contents—repeats the promise of covenant restoration (cf. 30:22; 31:31–34) as something that will occur "at that time." This chronological phrase is a typical part of the prophetic repertoire for speaking about the future, and it fits well in the context of the repeated references in chapters 30–31 to the future.

"That time" is a reference to a decisive time of divine activity and the resulting changes brought to fruition as a result. The previous verse (30:24) refers to the "days to come," and elsewhere chapter 31 contains three references to "the days are [time is] coming" (31:27, 31, 38). How far into the future is not specified by such references; the emphasis is on the *qualitative* changes between the present grim circumstances and the future God has promised. In the chapter are also predictions of a restoration of Israel¹⁰ to its land, so that return from the Exile is part of the future that God promises to the generation of judgment in Jeremiah's "day."

Israel's restoration provides a thematic coherence to chapter 31, but it is unlikely that the chapter originated as a literary unity; rather, various predictions from the prophet about the future are collected together to convey to hearer and reader alike that God intends a transformed future for his people. As noted in the introductory comments to chapters 30–33, readers should not think of a single event or discrete period as the only fulfillment of these future hopes. It is the quality of God's intended future that stands out in the chapter. The poetic nature and variety of claims for the future are best understood as indications of the multiple ways in which the Lord will bring (even future for us today) these words to fulfillment.

Chapter 31 can be subdivided into nine different units of speech (vv. 2–6, 7–9, 10–14, 15–20, 21–26, 27–30, 31–34, 35–37, 38–40). Several of the units have introductory and/or concluding formulae that mark the units. This is prophetic speech that places the emphasis on divine communication. Jeremiah has receded into the background, and his circumstances are hardly mentioned (except for the cryptic comment in 31:26). Perhaps this mysterious verse indicates that some or all of the preceding prophecies in the chapter are the result of dreams.

31:2–6. God's people are addressed in familiar imagery. He reminds them that they can find his favor even in the desert (*midbar*). This should probably be understood in two senses: (1) as a typological comparison with the spiritual history of their ancestors, when that generation found favor with God in the desert, and (2) as a reference to the experience of exile and the hope that God would bring his people home through the desert. The future rebuilding of "Virgin Israel" (a metaphorical reference to the people)¹² indicates that God has loved them with an "everlasting love" and drawn them back to himself with "loving-kindness" (*ḥesed*). This latter term refers to commitments that spring from affection and loyalty rather than those prescribed by law. The language and thought forms are like those of Hosea (Hos. 2:14–23), who depicted God's covenant renewal with Israel in terms of an "alluring" of Israel in the desert and the betrothal of her to him with loving-kindness (*ḥesed*).

Zion will play an important role in the future restoration. Those in Ephraim will call to one another with the request to "go up to Zion." There they will come to the Lord their God. This is pilgrimage language.

- **31:7–9.** The Lord proposes a song of praise for a saved remnant. In the poetry of this short prophecy, there is parallelism between the expressions "your people" and "the remnant of Israel" (v. 7). Readers should take note of the term *Israel* in context. Verse 9 uses the term to refer specifically to the former northern kingdom by way of comparison with Ephraim, God's "firstborn" (cf. Ex. 4:22; Hos. 11:1). Perhaps the remnant reference here has a particular focus on those exiled by the Assyrians in the eighth century.
- **31:10–14.** The nations are to take note that God intends to redeem his people. God, who scattered the people in judgment, is a shepherd who will gather them. The poetry of verse 11 links two terms to describe God's reacquisition of his people. The NIV translates *pdh*, the first verb, as

"ransom." Indeed it does mean purchase. This word is used in Exodus 13:13 to refer to the substitutionary sacrifice for a firstborn animal; the Israelites could ransom or redeem a firstborn animal among their flocks by offering (in one sense, "paying" with) a substitute. The term is used also for the ransom of a slave (Ex. 21:8).¹³

The second verb, a synonym of *pdh*, is *g'l*, translated by the NIV as "redeem." The word has its roots in family custom, where a relative could use his possessions and influence to extricate other family members from such difficulties as debts or other social obligations.¹⁴

As with a previous prophecy, Zion is one of the goals of a rejoicing people. In its primary sense the passage refers to the new exodus, which God is about to accomplish by bringing his scattered people back to their homes. The language of joy and delight in verses 12–14 is every bit as extravagant as the thorough language of judgment used elsewhere in Jeremiah. "Mourning" will be turned into "gladness."

31:15–20. The mourning of the Promised Land for the loss of "her" children is described through the metaphor of Rachel weeping. Rachel was the favorite wife of Jacob and mother of Joseph and Benjamin (Gen. 29–30). She died in childbirth with Benjamin and was buried between Bethel and Bethlehem (35:16–26). A monument was built to mark her tomb. Jeremiah's reference to weeping in Ramah (meaning "hill" in Heb.) apparently refers to the place of this monument. Ramah may refer to the hilltop mentioned in the Samuel narratives as the home of Hannah, Elkanah, and the prophet Samuel, or perhaps to another hilltop shrine known to the audience in Jeremiah's day.

Rachel's children are coming home. This means that there is a hope for Rachel's future. Here again the first element in the renewal of Israel comes in the restoration of exiles to their ancestral home.¹⁵

Verses 18–20 can be taken as a separate oracle from verses 15–17. The speaker changes from Rachel to Ephraim. The sentiment, however, in these verses is similar. The Israelites who have sinned and been cast from their land are personified in Ephraim, who confesses his failures. God tenderly accepts his repentance, describing Ephraim as his "dear son" (cf. 31:9), a child for whom his heart yearns. God's parental mercy is paramount in these verses.

31:21–26. This section is combined of both poetry and prose. The poetry (vv. 21–22) calls for highway markers to be erected so that "Virgin Israel" can find her way home. In this metaphorical expression she is also personified as God's "unfaithful daughter." In context it is difficult to know whether the referent behind Virgin Israel is the city of Samaria or the people. In either case, the female gender is important to the poetry. The text describes her return to her homeland as a new thing that God will create —"a woman will surround a man."

This imagery has caused difficulties and significant divergence for interpreters, as a perusal of commentaries will show.¹⁶ Contextually the emphasis seems to fall on the newness that only the Lord can create. (1) This is indicated by the verb *bara*' (to create), used in verse 22 to describe what the Lord will do. This verb is used in Genesis 1:1 to describe God's creation of the heavens and the earth. Of all the occurrences of this verb in the Old Testament where the meaning is "to create," God is the only subject.¹⁷

(2) The phrase "a woman will encompass [or surround] a man" is a reversal of what was expected in male-female relations in ancient Near Eastern society. The phrase may have a sexual connotation (i.e., the woman initiates intimate relations); it certainly is surprising and indicates initiative and the exercise of authority or power. Already in context the reader has encountered Rachel, the personified land, who weeps for her children. Perhaps it is she or the renewed Virgin Israel who encompasses the man Ephraim. In any case, the phrase points to a surprising and compassionate act of God in making new life possible for those who were estranged in exile.

Restoration of the people is the theme of verses 23–25. While this theme is familiar in the immediate context, it is still important to note that God is the subject of the verbs "bring back," "refresh," and "satisfy." He is the chief actor in the drama of the return.

31:27–30. The introductory formula indicates that a change is coming in the future. The language is that of Jeremiah's commission to prophesy in 1:10. Not only will God pluck up and destroy Judah, but he will also build and plant Israel and Judah. The use of both names conveys totality (cf. 31:31). The form of their life together is not stated. Furthermore, the future will bring an end to the complaints that corporate judgment is unjust

(31:29–30). Each person will indeed bear his or her own sins in God's judgment of the people.¹⁸

31:31–34. This well-known passage, with its proclamation of a new covenant (berit hadasa), is a summary of Jeremiah's message. It moves from the righteous judgment that has come on Israel and Judah because of their disobedience to the restoration of God's people in a new relationship with him. God's torah ("law," the verbal expression of his will) will become a constituent part of a person/people when God writes it on their hearts. This striking claim is a play on God's writing of the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone (Ex. 32:9–16). Furthermore, the effects of sin to spoil relationships are completely done away with in the incredible claim that God will no longer remember them (and their destructive influence).

The objects of God's restoration are "the house of Israel and ... the house of Judah." As in the previous section (31:27), these terms denote inclusivity as referring to all of God's people. They do not disqualify any other peoples among the nations from being included, but such possibilities are not mentioned either. What is "new" about the new covenant is not the covenant partner but the quality of the community created by God's amazing acts.

The passage contains frank recognition of previous failure, even though God initiated a first covenant with the people. That covenant was at Mount Sinai—a covenant that the people collectively broke. The NIV translates the conclusion of verse 32 as "though I was a husband to them." This is an acceptable rendering of the verb *ba'al* in the Hebrew text, a verb that means to marry, to own, or to be master over. The imagery is similar to that used in 2:2, where the prophet reminds the people of the bridal period of their youth, when God brought his people to himself in the desert and entered into a covenant with them (cf. Ezek. 16:8).¹⁹

It is the quality of the covenant bond between God and his people that gives the essential "newness" to the coming new covenant. As noted above, the imagery is the writing of God's instruction on the human heart rather than on the tablets of stone. Knowledge of God, therefore, is internalized. Furthermore, the ability of sin to disrupt the relationship is made obsolete by the astounding announcement that God will not remember sins and their effects on the relationship.

The phrase "new covenant" occurs only this once in the Old Testament, although Jeremiah twice announces an "everlasting covenant" (*berit 'olam*) that God will establish with his people (Jer. 32:40; 50:5). Several prophetic books refer to a renewal of the Mosaic (Sinai) covenant with Israel and Judah in similar terms. Hosea 2:14–23 speaks metaphorically of God's bringing Israel again into the desert and reclaiming the people in a covenantal bond likened to marriage. Ezekiel (Ezek. 16:60; 37:26) and Isaiah (Isa. 55:3) have references to an "everlasting covenant" that point to the same future for God's people as Jeremiah.

This famous "new covenant" passage proclaims that an ultimate restoration of the covenant relationship between God and his people includes the transformation of corporate existence. In essence, it is a summary of all that God will accomplish in the renewing of his covenant relationship with his people (see comments on "the new covenant" in the Bridging Contexts section).

31:35–40. The fidelity of God to his people is cast by analogy with the fixed order of the cosmos. Just as the order of the cosmos is sure, so is God's commitment to his people. The final claim is for the rebuilding of Jerusalem, but the text needs careful consideration in its context. It is not a simple rebuilding of the city that is envisioned; the city, like the people of the new covenant, is to be transformed and will never again be overthrown (cf. Ezek. 40–48).

Bridging Contexts

THE ULTIMATE STATE. As noted above, this chapter concentrates in various ways on the quality of the renewed relationship with the Lord that Israel will experience. Also, as part of its original setting, the chapter presupposes the particularities of Israel and Judah in the humiliation of their failure and the resulting physical collapse of their respective states. As part of the Book of Consolation, Jeremiah 31 projects a future in which God's righteous judgment is superseded by his sovereign work of redemption. Israel is called on to accept in faith that this future is sure and to live in anticipation of the coming redemption.

Here is a key for hearing these ancient words as instructive for the church. The current circumstances of God's people do not reflect their

ultimate estate. They are called to confess their sins, to respond obediently as disciples of the risen Christ, and to anticipate the culmination of the reign of God to come with the second advent of Christ. Thus, Christians should interpret the future proclaimed to Israel in Jeremiah 31 in the context of the covenant established in Christ for all believers, Jew and Gentile alike.

The new covenant. Jeremiah's inspired expression "new covenant" has been used for centuries as the heading or title to the twenty-seven documents that form the second half of the Christian Bible, that is, the New Testament. The Latin word *testamentum*, which underlies the English term *testament*, translates the Hebrew word b^e rit ("covenant"). Early Christians, therefore, made an interpretive bridge between the proclamation of the prophet and the content of the gospel of God set forth in Jesus Christ.²⁰

One sees this understanding as well within the pages of the New Testament. At the Last Supper Jesus describes the cup as a representation of the "new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25). Two other Gospel writers record the phrase "blood of the covenant" (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24), which reflects the initial covenant ceremony at Sinai (Ex. 24).

The apostle Paul understands the gospel of new life in Christ to be a fulfillment of the hope expressed in Jeremiah's prediction of the new covenant (2 Cor. 3:1–18). As an apostle, Paul describes himself as a servant of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit (3:6). His emphasis on the work of God's Spirit shows that he understands Jeremiah's prediction of a transformed heart to be the work of God's Spirit in the life of a Christian. Nevertheless, the coming of Christ and the gift of the Spirit do not exhaust the promises made in the new covenant; the complete transformation of God's people is still in the future.

Finally, the anonymous letter to the Hebrews likewise boldly proclaims that Christ's great salvific work as a high priest on behalf of his people is based on the "new" and "better" covenant announced by Jeremiah (Heb. 8–9).

What all the New Testament references have in common is a belief that the future redemption promised by God through Jeremiah (or any of the prophets) has dawned in the ministry of Jesus Christ and will be brought to an ultimate fulfillment in his second coming at the end of the age. Jeremiah's promise to the house of Israel and the house of Judah (Jer. 31:31) is applied to Jewish and Gentile Christians alike, who comprise the

church. Because of Christ's advent and through the continuing ministry of the Spirit, the church has tasted an "already" of the future Jeremiah foresaw.

Nevertheless, there is a "not yet" as the current age runs its course. This interplay of "already" and "not yet" places the church in an anticipatory posture similar to that of Jeremiah's own contemporaries. The prophet's announcement that God intended a transformed future for his people was an "already" that believers could trust. It was a goal for their future that they could use to chart their course in the present. One may interpret similarly Jeremiah's announcement of the restoration of the people in their land. It was a tangible expression, an "already" that pointed beyond itself to a complete transformation of God's people as he worked out his eschatological purposes among them.

Contemporary Significance

God's redemptive action will have a shape and form to it. This is true wherever a scriptural word is taken to heart. Those persons are right who emphasize that salvation in Christ is by grace alone through faith; salvation is God's work, whether we talk of individuals or of the final advent of Christ and the full manifestation of his kingdom (which will include the transformation of the heavens and the earth as we now know them). God calls people to respond to what he has already accomplished through Christ, to grow in their faith and their identity as one of Christ's own (sanctification), and to live in anticipation of the final advent of Christ and the glorious unveiling of his reign in full triumph over evil and death itself.

Jeremiah 31 is the voice of an inspired spiritual ancestor who spoke to his contemporaries about the shape that God's action would take in their lives and that of their descendants (e.g., return from exile, a purified worship, knowledge of forgiveness). Perhaps in the present we can think of things in our lives that are "signs" of God at work, things whose shape and function portray the work of God. These things may be personal; they may concern the family; they may be part of the life of fellowship one enjoys among friends and in the activities of a congregation. Signs of redemption should point not only to what has already been accomplished in Christ but also to what still lies ahead. There is always a future tense to the life of believers.

Mother Teresa died in Calcutta in September 1997. A commentator on her life noted that in a speech she delivered a few years previously to the American Congress, Mother Teresa had offended nearly everyone in the assembly by talking about the neglect of the poor in society. She went on to remark that abortion was the most egregious example of evil against the defenseless, thereby offending yet another segment of the audience. She chided those of Protestant persuasion that faith without works made for a lifeless religion, doing yet more "damage." Her point? There should be a form to and tangible evidence of God at work in his people. She was popularly described as a social activist, but she preferred to be called "religious." In the classical Catholic sense, that meant she lived out her vocation as a response to the call and claim of God. When the gospel of forgiveness and new life in Christ take root in a person or community, there will be change—and any changes will be but steps along the way toward the future that God will usher in. "For in this hope we were saved" (Rom. 8:24).

The Christian life comes with the gift of familiarity and even spiritual intimacy among believers. Jeremiah's prediction that God will write his torah, that is, his instruction, on human hearts takes shape in the church through the work of the Holy Spirit. "To know God" in an intimate and corporate way is not just a future promise. There is an "already" to this experience in the Christian life through the agency of God's Spirit just as there is the exciting anticipation of things "not yet" realized and only intimated. Forgiveness is something that can be experienced in the present; it is a promise of God that can and should give shape and substance to the present reality of Christian existence. Forgiveness helps one anticipate a future where even the remembrance of sin and failure have no role.

God's promises regarding Israel. God's redemptive work gives shape and substance to the life of his people. In various ways the New Testament claims the promises to Israel as promises to the church. One sees this in the use of the "new covenant" passage in the Gospels and letters. Modern Christians have differed considerably over how to read the Old Testament in light of Christ and in the way they interpret the promises to Israel as a future yet unrealized. No one can "solve" all the issues of this topic in a sermon or brief reflection. Nevertheless, Jeremiah's promise of Israel's restoration and its security before the Lord should compel modern Christians to ask about the contemporary significance of believing Judaism

(as opposed to an ethnic definition) and the place of the modern state of Israel in God's economy.

"All Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26). Paul could write this because the Old Testament proclaimed a future for God's people, a future not realized in Paul's day any more than in Jeremiah's day. Indeed, there was no state called Israel in Paul's day. Jews lived scattered throughout the Roman Empire, and those Jews who lived within the former boundaries (which changed over the centuries) of Israel were subject to the power of Roman administration. The reason to hear this quote from Paul is a theological one, whether or not the interpreters who stand before this claim know what Paul means by Israel. It takes seriously the shape of God's promises. God has made promises to a people, albeit a people whose political shape and religious profile have changed over the centuries. They are the spiritual ancestors of Christians today.

If the church has inherited the promises made to Israel (as I believe), does this mean that God has simply turned his back in righteous judgment on Jews because they have failed to recognize Jesus as God's Son and Redeemer? The answer is "no." Certainly modern Christians have the responsibility to proclaim the gospel to Jews just as to any who do not know Christ as Savior and Lord. Christians should do so, however, with confidence that God has made promises to his people Israel (historically his "first love"), and that these promises will have an ultimate fulfillment. Those promises will have shape and substance in this age, and their influence will extend even beyond that.

Does this mean that modern Christians should have special concern for the modern state of Israel (a political entity, not to be identified with believing Judaism)? Again the answer is "no"; but God's promises to Israel do mean that Christians should have a special affinity for believing Judaism, and they should recognize that God is still at work among believing Jews in a mysterious way. God's promises hold out a future in which his people will be redeemed and constituted as a transformed community with Christ as its head. This is the future of all of God's people (the Israel of God), including Jews who confess Jesus as the Christ.

¹This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD in the tenth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. ²The army of the king of Babylon was then besieging Jerusalem, and Jeremiah the prophet was confined in the courtyard of the guard in the royal palace of Judah.

³Now Zedekiah king of Judah had imprisoned him there, saying, "Why do you prophesy as you do? You say, 'This is what the LORD says: I am about to hand this city over to the king of Babylon, and he will capture it. ⁴Zedekiah king of Judah will not escape out of the hands of the Babylonians but will certainly be handed over to the king of Babylon, and will speak with him face to face and see him with his own eyes. ⁵He will take Zedekiah to Babylon, where he will remain until I deal with him, declares the LORD. If you fight against the Babylonians, you will not succeed."

⁶Jeremiah said, "The word of the LORD came to me: ⁷Hanamel son of Shallum your uncle is going to come to you and say, 'Buy my field at Anathoth, because as nearest relative it is your right and duty to buy it.'

8"Then, just as the LORD had said, my cousin Hanamel came to me in the courtyard of the guard and said, 'Buy my field at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. Since it is your right to redeem it and possess it, buy it for yourself.'

"I knew that this was the word of the LORD; 9so I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel and weighed out for him seventeen shekels of silver. 10I signed and sealed the deed, had it witnessed, and weighed out the silver on the scales. 11I took the deed of purchase—the sealed copy containing the terms and conditions, as well as the

unsealed copy—¹² and I gave this deed to Baruch son of Neriah, the son of Mahseiah, in the presence of my cousin Hanamel and of the witnesses who had signed the deed and of all the Jews sitting in the courtyard of the guard.

13"In their presence I gave Baruch these instructions: 14'This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Take these documents, both the sealed and unsealed copies of the deed of purchase, and put them in a clay jar so they will last a long time. 15 For this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land.'

¹⁶"After I had given the deed of purchase to Baruch son of Neriah, I prayed to the LORD:

17"Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you. ¹⁸You show love to thousands but bring the punishment for the fathers' sins into the laps of their children after them. O great and powerful God, whose name is the LORD Almighty, ¹⁹great are your purposes and mighty are your deeds. Your eyes are open to all the ways of men; you reward everyone according to his conduct and as his deeds deserve. ²⁰You performed miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt and have continued them to this day, both in Israel and among all mankind, and have gained the renown that is still yours. ²¹You brought your people Israel out of Egypt with signs and wonders, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with great terror.

²²You gave them this land you had sworn to give their forefathers, a land flowing with milk and honey. ²³They came in and took possession of it, but they did not obey you or follow your law; they did not do what you commanded them to do. So you brought all this disaster upon them.

²⁴"See how the siege ramps are built up to take the city. Because of the sword, famine and plague, the city will be handed over to the Babylonians who are attacking it. What you said has happened, as you now see.

²⁵And though the city will be handed over to the Babylonians, you, O Sovereign LORD, say to me, 'Buy the field with silver and have the transaction witnessed.'"

²⁶Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: ²⁷"I am the LORD, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me? ²⁸Therefore, this is what the LORD says: I am about to hand this city over to the Babylonians and to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, who will capture it. ²⁹The Babylonians who are attacking this city will come in and set it on fire; they will burn it down, along with the houses where the people provoked me to anger by burning incense on the roofs to Baal and by pouring out drink offerings to other gods.

³⁰"The people of Israel and Judah have done nothing but evil in my sight from their youth; indeed, the people of Israel have done nothing but provoke me with what their hands have made, declares the LORD. ³¹From the day it was built until now, this city has so aroused my anger and wrath that I must remove it from my sight. ³²The people of

Israel and Judah have provoked me by all the evil they have done—they, their kings and officials, their priests and prophets, the men of Judah and the people of Jerusalem. ³³They turned their backs to me and not their faces; though I taught them again and again, they would not listen or respond to discipline. ³⁴They set up their abominable idols in the house that bears my Name and defiled it. ³⁵They built high places for Baal in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to sacrifice their sons and daughters to Molech, though I never commanded, nor did it enter my mind, that they should do such a detestable thing and so make Judah sin.

³⁶"You are saying about this city, 'By the sword, famine and plague it will be handed over to the king of Babylon'; but this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says:

where I banish them in my furious anger and great wrath; I will bring them back to this place and let them live in safety. ³⁸They will be my people, and I will be their God. ³⁹I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me for their own good and the good of their children after them. ⁴⁰I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me. ⁴¹I will rejoice in doing them good and will assuredly plant them in this land with all my heart and soul.

⁴²"This is what the LORD says: As I have brought all this great calamity on this people, so I will give them all the prosperity I have promised them.

⁴³Once more fields will be bought in this land of which you say, 'It is a desolate waste, without men or animals, for it has been handed over to the

Babylonians.' ⁴⁴Fields will be bought for silver, and deeds will be signed, sealed and witnessed in the territory of Benjamin, in the villages around Jerusalem, in the towns of Judah and in the towns of the hill country, of the western foothills and of the Negev, because I will restore their fortunes, declares the LORD."

Original Meaning

THIS CHAPTER CONTINUES the hopeful section of Jeremiah. The hope is in the power of God to overcome the self-destructive consequences of Judah's folly. Chapter 32 has three major sections: Jeremiah's purchase of property as a prophetic sign (32:1–15), his prayer to the Lord (32:16–25), and a commentary from the Lord on Judah's fate and future (32:26–44).

32:1–15. The chronological reference in verse 1 has caused some difficulties for interpreters. Nebuchadnezzar's eighteenth year on the reckoning of the Babylonian system would be 587/586, while the tenth year of Zedekiah, which has its own problems for interpreters, is 588/587. As noted in the introduction to the commentary, the problems associated with regnal years beginning in the spring or fall and with whether an accession year is assumed make for some problematic chronological reconstructions for the two kings in question.

The historical setting of chapter 32, however, is clear. Babylon has besieged Jerusalem for a second time, and Jeremiah is confined in the city by a royal guard. Apparently the Babylonians began the siege late in the year 588. Subsequently an Egyptian force began a march toward Palestine and caused a temporary easing of the siege (cf. Jer. 37:5). It is plausible that at this time (spring 587?) Jeremiah is visited by his cousin Hanamel, and they carry out the transaction narrated at the chapter's beginning.

Jeremiah's continual prophecies about the sovereignty of Babylon over Judah and Jerusalem have been perceived as seditious, and as a result he is imprisoned or confined on several occasions. His announcement to Zedekiah here (32:3–4) that Jerusalem and the king will be handed over to Babylon is essentially repeated in 34:2–3. Once he is arrested for attempting to leave Jerusalem (37:11–14). Perhaps Hanamel's visit to him

in Jerusalem is in response to Jeremiah's failed attempt to reach his ancestral home and to carry out his personal affairs. In any case, family business at a time of crisis becomes the occasion for a prophetic symbolic act.

Jeremiah purchases (g'l; lit., redeems) some family property.²¹ It should be remembered that much of an Israelite family's identity was tied to its possessions. A "household" (an extended family) was defined not merely by a list of its members but also by its property and the related functions of its members. Indeed, "household" (bayit)²² is the closest term in Hebrew to what modern people call a family. A particularly significant element of what defined most families was its patrimony or its inheritance. This property, unlike perhaps other things the family possessed, was not to be sold to those outside of the clan (the kin of the family).²³ Thus, when there were economic difficulties or other types of hardship, the property could be used as collateral and sold to members within the clan (or even tribe), but it was not to be alienated permanently from the family of possession.

According to Jeremiah 32:7 the prophet has the "right of redemption" to the property "owned" by Hanamel. His right comes by virtue of family ties. For Jeremiah to redeem the property means either that the property already has a *lien* (to use a modern term) against it and the family of Hanamel still needs money desperately, or similarly, that the needs of Hanamel's family are such that they will "sell" the property to Jeremiah in order to satisfy some of their other obligations. Needless to say, a time of siege is not the time to be buying property. Whatever the specific reason behind the request of Hanamel, such a request reflects a time of desperation as families seek whatever means they can to keep life and limb together.

Jeremiah's purchase of Hanamel's property becomes a vehicle, a symbolic act, intended to illustrate his message. At one of the darkest moments in Judah's history, when the Babylonian reduction of the country is in an advanced state and the successful siege of Jerusalem seems merely a matter of time, Jeremiah purchases the property because "houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land" (32:15). There will be a future for God's people, including restoration to their land after the pain of defeat and the trauma of exile.

Baruch assists Jeremiah in carrying out the purchase and the preparation of the necessary records. He is a scribe (36:32); that is, the preparation,

reading, and preservation of documents are skills of his profession. Baruch will assist Jeremiah in the preparing of a scroll of prophecies in chapter 36. His patronymic is supplied in 32:12: He is "son of Neriah, the son of Mahseiah." The preservation of the purchase documents is described in some detail. In time to come they will serve as verification of Jeremiah's prophecy that land and fields will again be bought.²⁶

32:16–25. In a prayer Jeremiah praises God as Creator, as merciful and righteous Judge in the historical process, and as the true God who chose Israel as his own. Also he acknowledges that the Babylonian siege is God's work. As a prose prayer it is not unlike that of Nehemiah 9:5–37. Both prayers intersperse hymnic elements that praise God with frank confession of sins.

This prayer ends abruptly with the statement that God has commanded Jeremiah to go and buy the field. It is a sign of the times. When others have lost hope, the "pessimistic" Jeremiah is called to signify a future, and his prayer testifies to readers that God, the Lord of history, is still at work.

32:26–44. God speaks to Jeremiah after the prophet's prayer concludes. His communication is a summary of what Jeremiah has proclaimed for years, that a righteous judgment will befall Judah and Jerusalem and that it will proceed not from God's weakness over against the powerful Babylonian deities, but from his intention to discipline and purge his people. Considerable space is devoted to the articulation of God's anger at the failures of the people. Verse 37 describes God's response as "furious anger and great wrath."

In addition to the articulation of wrath, God reiterates the significance of Jeremiah's land purchase as a sign of the Lord's resolve to restore and bless his people. Both current calamity and future blessing are the work of God. In his prayer, Jeremiah confessed in awe that "nothing is too hard" for God (32:17). In his answer, God's rhetorical question asks: "Is anything too hard for me?" (32:27). Through this God reassures the people that what he has promised he can deliver.

God's announced future holds forth the miraculous promises of an "everlasting covenant" (32:40), a changed heart for the people (32:39), and life again in the Promised Land (32:41). These prose promises are related to the poetic announcements in chapters 30–31, which also concern the people's future. The "everlasting covenant" is essentially a synonym for the

"new covenant" in 31:31–34. The qualitative changes depicted for the new covenant, once brought to fruition, will be everlasting.²⁷

The chapter ends as it began. As Jeremiah has bought a field, so shall others buy property in the future. In Jeremiah's "purchase" God's promised future has already begun to take symbolic shape.

Bridging Contexts

IN TIMES OF THREAT. Judah and Jerusalem find themselves under threat. Such can be the common lot of humankind in its corporate life. Circumstances of threat and danger come periodically. Theological questions are inevitable in times of trouble; they are not as frequent in times of blessing and security. Where is God in these horrible circumstances, and what must be done in response to the predicament?

Judah's circumstances are the result of its own moral and spiritual failures. This is a scenario that has been and will be repeated in the history of God's people, for they are not immune to the threatening circumstances that come periodically. Although moral and spiritual failures are by no means the only cause of suffering (personal or corporate), they are the reasons in this case. God is not absent in the process whereby Judah reaps what it has sown but is present to move the process beyond self-incurred judgment. God has given the people over to their folly and has used the historical process as judgment on them. Is this God's final word to the "fallen"? No; judgment is a penultimate word, a stage in God's dealings with his people that leads to a future that only God can bring about.

Word and deed. Jeremiah's prophetic sign comes about in the context of family duty and solidarity. He exercises the "right of redemption" that belongs to him as a member of an extended family. His payment to Hanamel is a tangible expression of his faith and an act that is commensurate with his message. Indeed the two are inseparable. Word and deed go together as a hallmark of Old Testament prophecy. During a time of national calamity and spiritual depression, Jeremiah expends his resources, making a statement about God's intention to redeem and to restore. He does so through the circumstances of his membership in a family. It is a family where some of its members have opposed his message and sought to persecute him (12:5–6). Similar dynamics occur periodically among God's

people in any age. Ministry often arises from the debris of cherished plans gone awry.

In the larger scriptural narrative Jeremiah's prophetic act is like that of Elijah on Mount Carmel, straining to see the first signs of rain clouds in a drought-stricken region (1 Kings 18:1–46). He looked for the cloud because water had been used as a sign that God was the Lord of the drought. Drought was on everyone's mind, and God would deal with his people through these circumstances. When finally a small cloud appeared, the prophet ran to signify that rain was on the way. Similarly, with defeat on everyone's mind, Jeremiah buys property to signify that through God's grace, property will again be bought and sold in the land by God's people. One might call this activity a tangible sign of God's grace. Here is a bridge to cross for any generation of God's people: What are the tangible signs of God's grace that you have chosen to illustrate your Christian hope?

One thing leads to another in Jeremiah 32. The making of commitments leads by way of provisional signs to something even greater. God's reply to Jeremiah's prayer becomes a reminder not only of small steps in a time of judgment but of redemption on a grand scale. This is a dynamic of the text that runs all the way from an imprisoned prophet to the announcement of an everlasting covenant. The same dynamic exists in the exercise of Christian faith. Small steps in the right direction point ahead to even greater things God has in store.

Contemporary Significance

VEHICLES FOR COMMUNICATION. As a college student I heard that one definition of an apologist for the Christian faith is a person who takes the thinking of the day and turns it into a defense of Christianity. There is a sense in which Jeremiah takes the circumstances of his day, particularly the crushing reminder of imminent failure that the siege of Jerusalem signifies for Judeans, and turns them and the mindset of the day into a vehicle for proclaiming God's truth. Viewed from this angle, the signs of the times become vehicles for communicating the signs of the kingdom. It is a perennial question: "How do I (we) exercise our faith in relevant fashion in my (our) particular context?" Perhaps one needs to look no further than the

circumstances of family and community that so frequently occupy our minds.

One can be quite specific. In the case of my own community, a rapidly growing area with escalating housing costs, so-called affordable housing has become a common problem. There is more than one organization dedicated to the search for affordable housing, and even to the building of such housing, for those in need. Some of these organizations are Christian, and they intend their efforts to be signs of the kingdom, examples of Christian commitment to a vision of wholeness in the community and opportunities to demonstrate provisionally the ethics of the kingdom. Those involved, from the builders to the occupants, are invited to trust the Lord and to dedicate themselves to his service in the community in which they live. These Christians build in hope in places where many others have despaired over their circumstances, present and future.

Prayer. Prayer is a key ingredient to the exercise of one's faith. Not only did Jeremiah buy, he prayed. To praise God as Creator, Judge, and Redeemer is to focus not on one's resources but on God, who calls one to obedience. Prayer (as in the case of Jeremiah and the purchase of property) is an acknowledgment that God is at work in the world and not aloof from the circumstances of his people. It is a reminder that the dominant concerns of a people or community may be the key to the most effective ways of ministry. Finally, prayer is the opportunity for petition. To trust God in difficult circumstances and to ask for guidance and deliverance becomes both a privilege and a responsibility.

Redemption. Redemption always costs something. This is a truth that should never be ignored. Whether it is the purchase of property or a theory to explain the atonement, the whole concept of redemption rests in the dynamics of a gift on behalf of those unable to gain something for themselves. For redemption to work, it requires those who have to give on behalf of those who don't. It is usually easier to argue about the faults of those who don't have rather than to celebrate that God has provided the opportunity to give so that others might live. Evangelism and social ethics both work best when they follow the scriptural pattern of joyful giving without concern for an accounting of merits. It is amazing what can be "redeemed" by the simple giving of talents bestowed by the Lord.

Western print media have recently noted the efforts on the part of some school-age children in the United States to collect money in order to purchase Christian boys and girls in Sudan who are held by Muslims there as slaves. Some members of the public have complained that the children are manipulated and that the situation in Sudan is too complex for making clear moral judgments. For example, it is argued that to purchase the children from slavery merely encourages the practice of kidnapping Christian children so that more money (ransoms) can be collected by the slave-traders. Perhaps there is some truth to this point about not encouraging slave-traders. But ask the question: How would you feel if you were a Christian Sudanese slave? Would you prefer continued debate on the ambiguities of the situation or that someone, somewhere, would take a stand?

In most debates, not all options are open for careful deliberation, as if someone is perusing a giant shopping list with virtually all options available and leisurely looking for the best bargain. I suggest the American children are to be commended for taking a real step, for making tangible efforts at securing the freedom of Christian slaves. While the debate continues on whether or not their purchase is a wise move, let it be said that some persons are willing to pay a price in an uncertain atmosphere simply because they believe that God wants the freedom of his people. While others continue to talk and wring their hands, they pray that God's kingdom and will may be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Jeremiah acted on the opportunity that came his way. It was definitely not a good business deal. His purchase symbolized, however, that God would redeem his people.

Jeremiah 33:1-26

¹WHILE JEREMIAH WAS still confined in the courtyard of the guard, the word of the LORD came to him a second time: ²"This is what the LORD says, he who made the earth, the LORD who formed it and established it—the LORD is his name: ³'Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.' ⁴For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says about the

houses in this city and the royal palaces of Judah that have been torn down to be used against the siege ramps and the sword ⁵in the fight with the Babylonians: 'They will be filled with the dead bodies of the men I will slay in my anger and wrath. I will hide my face from this city because of all its wickedness.

6"'Nevertheless, I will bring health and healing to it; I will heal my people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security. ⁷I will bring Judah and Israel back from captivity and will rebuild them as they were before. ⁸I will cleanse them from all the sin they have committed against me and will forgive all their sins of rebellion against me. ⁹Then this city will bring me renown, joy, praise and honor before all nations on earth that hear of all the good things I do for it; and they will be in awe and will tremble at the abundant prosperity and peace I provide for it.'

10"This is what the LORD says: 'You say about this place, "It is a desolate waste, without men or animals." Yet in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are deserted, inhabited by neither men nor animals, there will be heard once more 11 the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, and the voices of those who bring thank offerings to the house of the LORD, saying,

"Give thanks to the LORD Almighty, for the LORD is good; his love endures forever."

For I will restore the fortunes of the land as they were before,' says the LORD.

¹²"This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'In this place, desolate and without men or animals—in all its towns there will again be pastures for shepherds to rest their flocks. ¹³In the towns of the hill country,

of the western foothills and of the Negev, in the territory of Benjamin, in the villages around Jerusalem and in the towns of Judah, flocks will again pass under the hand of the one who counts them,' says the LORD.

¹⁴"The days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah.

15"In those days and at that time
I will make a righteous Branch sprout
from David's line;
he will do what is just and right in the
land.

16In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.This is the name by which it will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness.'

¹⁷For this is what the LORD says: 'David will never fail to have a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, ¹⁸nor will the priests, who are Levites, ever fail to have a man to stand before me continually to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings and to present sacrifices.'"

¹⁹The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah:
²⁰"This is what the LORD says: 'If you can break
my covenant with the day and my covenant with the
night, so that day and night no longer come at their
appointed time, ²¹then my covenant with David my
servant—and my covenant with the Levites who are
priests ministering before me—can be broken and
David will no longer have a descendant to reign on
his throne. ²²I will make the descendants of David
my servant and the Levites who minister before me
as countless as the stars of the sky and as
measureless as the sand on the seashore.""

²⁴"Have you not noticed that these people are saying, 'The LORD has rejected the two kingdoms he chose'? So they despise my people and no longer regard them as a nation. ²⁵This is what the LORD says: 'If I have not established my covenant with day and night and the fixed laws of heaven and earth, ²⁶then I will reject the descendants of Jacob and David my servant and will not choose one of his sons to rule over the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For I will restore their fortunes and have compassion on them.'"

Original Meaning

33:1–3. This chapter concludes the "Book of Consolation" (chs. 30–33). Verse 1 links this chapter with chapter 32. God speaks a "second time" to Jeremiah while he is confined under guard and the Babylonians are besieging the city of Jerusalem. Thus one should probably read the prose narratives in chapters 32 and 33 as scene 1 and scene 2 in the narration of Jeremiah's prison experiences.

There are also links between chapter 33 and the largely poetic oracles in chapters 30–31. For example, they have in common the phrase *šub šebutes* (NIV "bring back from captivity, restore the fortunes"), which succinctly captures much of the emphasis on corporate renewal. The phrase occurs three times in chapter 33 (vv. 7, 11, 26) alone, serving as a thread of continuity in the prose speeches of the Lord.

The emphasis in this chapter is on God speaking (33:2, 10, 12, 17, 19, 23), almost as if the divine commentary that concluded chapter 32 is picked up again, with continued emphasis on the future turning of Judah's fortune. Readers and hearers should note that God's communication to the prisoner is meant for them. The narrator intends for readers to be instructed by what is said to the prophet. Even as a "listener," therefore, Jeremiah is in the prophetic mode of conveying the Lord's message to his contemporaries by repeating what he hears.

- **33:4–9.** God reiterates his promise to redeem Judah and Jerusalem. The turning fortunes of the people are here described as God's "healing" them.²⁹ Healing also includes forgiveness, along with such tangible signs of restoration as resettlement in the land of promise, rebuilding Jerusalem ("this city" in v. 9), and security while dwelling there. These promises reiterate those made in previous chapters. Other peoples will learn to fear (hold in awe) God because of Judah's restoration. Here again the theme of Jeremiah as "prophet to the nations" comes to the fore.
- **33:10–13.** These verses continue to emphasize a joyful future for the people as a reversal of the judgment on and the misery suffered by Judah. Cities in Judah will again be inhabited. The temple will again have worship. Verse 11 contains a familiar refrain from the temple liturgy: "Give thanks to the LORD Almighty, for the LORD is good; his love [hesed] endures forever." This is the characteristic phrase of the temple singers appointed by David (1 Chron. 16:41) and is known from the praises of the Psalter (Ps. 106:1; 118:1, 29; 136; cf. 100:4). For someone who had been as critical about the temple as Jeremiah, such a text reminds us that his criticisms presuppose no enduring hostility to the temple, only toward its misuse and corruption.
- **33:14–18.** There is more than one chronological moment to the "good word" that God provides. These verses are introduced by the prophetic formula for the future: "The days are coming." Both Israel and Judah are included in the future transformation. In addition to the corporate restoration of the people, Jeremiah announces that "a righteous Branch … from David's line" will arise and execute justice and righteousness (see also 23:5–6). This promise is messianic in that it depends on the promises made by God to David's family (see below). Jerusalem will even receive a new symbolic name: "The LORD [is] Our Righteousness."³⁰
- 33:19–22. The work of Davidic rule and that of priestly ministry will not cease. These announcements indicate that God's promises (when finally realized in their completeness) will never end. God will undergird two fundamental institutions of the people in perpetuity. Someone from David's line will be head of the people, and descendants of Levi, the priestly tribe, will always be available to officiate in public worship.³¹

There is an allusion to the promises made to Abraham. He was promised descendants like the stars of heaven and the sand on the seashore (Gen.

15:5; 22:17); here God promises innumerable descendants to the Davidic line and the Levitical priests.

33:23–26. God has heard the despair and cynicism of his people. Those who conclude that God has simply rejected them are wrong. God has not broken his covenant with day and night (cf. 33:20), nor has he rejected his people. The use of covenant language in this context is appropriate. A covenant (b^e rit) is a solemn promise often undergirded by an oath. God's covenant with day and night is not an agreement with those inanimate parties but the expression of his sovereign resolve to maintain a beneficent order. Because of his mercy, the people still have a future.

Bridging Contexts

THE WORD FOR THE FUTURE. God's word about the future is usually built on the prevailing circumstances of the first recipients. His word in Jeremiah 33 presupposes the circumstances of his people in the despair of defeat and in the (soon-to-come) trauma of exile. There is a sense in which Jerusalem is like Jeremiah; as the prophet is detained by guards and his movement restricted, so the city is under siege and its movement constricted—and defeat is imminent.

What is corporate life to be like for Judah when its cities are deserted, its temple in ruins, and its king in exile? Judah and Jerusalem are called on to trust that all these circumstances can be reversed in God's good time. God will deal with the present predicament and reverse the judgment it contains. God takes seriously the particulars of their plight and promises to deal with them. Modern readers should take heart at this pattern and trust that God knows the particulars of their situation (and that of the communities in which his people live).

As noted above, the promises of chapter 33 about the future can be found elsewhere in Jeremiah (esp. chs. 30–32). Thus, chapter 33 should not be read in isolation from other sections of Jeremiah and indeed from other sections of those prophets that speak about the restoration of the people.³³ Although these elaborations have variation in vocabulary and detail, they are consistent with claims elsewhere in the Old Testament that speak about transformations to come.

Although these promises are not new to modern readers, we should not be lulled into complacency because "we know how it all comes out." God has made promises to the house of David³⁴ and vows that there will always be priestly worship. Thus, on the one hand, God deals with the particulars of his people in the trauma of defeat and exile. The future he has promised contains the institutions of monarchy and temple and the renewed gift of the land. On the other hand, there is surprise in store for God's people as the shape of those promises is reconfigured in Christ (David's Son and heir of the promises) and through the people who are "in Christ."

A veil on the panorama of God's promised future is partially lifted in the New Testament, but in doing so, the full realization of God's promises is still future-oriented. Christ is the promised Ruler from David's line, and his ministry on behalf of his people as a great high priest³⁵ discloses the depth of God's commitment to the future of his people. Then as now, they are called to trust in God's promise and to live according to the hope revealed to them.

Christian hope is structured essentially like that of Old Testament prophetic hope: It has a "future tense" while it maintains itself through responsible engagement in the present. The future restoration predicted by Jeremiah is even now still "in process," long after initial realizations in the return from exile and the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple. Contemporary Christians should be prepared for surprise and wonder when God brings in his kingdom in its fullness.

Contemporary Significance

WORKING FOR THE LORD IN ADVERSE SITUATIONS. One wonders what it is about prison life that gives rise to such deep reflections as those given in the Bible to prisoners. Joseph, Jeremiah, Paul, and John (the seer of the Apocalypse) come immediately to mind. Recent years have contributed powerful testimony to the ways of God from prison cells (e.g., Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Charles Colson, Nelson Mandela, Karla Faye Tucker). Perhaps the obvious answer is "time." Prisoners typically have "time on their hands," since their movements and activities are forcibly restricted. Perhaps also it is the quality of the experience of God during incarceration. Though some prisoners become bored and irrational in their confinement,

others are motivated to develop certain skills and mental faculties as they are able. God has found this setting to be a propitious time to approach his chosen ones and to teach his people through them.

Contemporary Christians, particularly in the West, may find this dynamic an odd one: Lose your freedom and find out more about God; be in despair and find yourself instructed about the power and mercy of God. God often finds an opportunity to reconstitute people's horizons about themselves when they are suddenly limited in their freedom. So it was for Judah, so it was for John on the isle of Patmos and the suffering churches of Asia Minor.

Charles Colson is a modern example of someone whose freedom was taken from him by the state because he had broken the law. While there, Colson dealt with more than the humiliation of imprisonment; he wrestled with his sinfulness before God and emerged from prison with Christian zeal. The lives of many prisoners and congregations have been dramatically changed because of his witness. God's promised future has the power to change the present circumstances of people as they yield themselves to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

In the last few years, the country of South Africa has undergone tremendous change. Nelson Mandela, a black South African and former political prisoner, was elected president of the country in 1994. With its former policies of apartheid and a past full of violence, the country had much to atone for and to overcome. Both partial blame for the past and the call to ministry in the present rest on the churches in the country. One wonders if the national Truth and Reconciliation Commission (established by the government to deal with past faults)³⁷ will be able to lead the country forward and help it prepare for the future.

Note well the title of that commission: truth and reconciliation. In God's economy the two go together. Since three-quarters of South Africans (of all races) confess Christ, there is the exciting and challenging prospect of Christian faith as the unifying center of the population. What opportunities lie before the churches at this crossroads in the history of that country! How does a Christian (or the church) see the future from a broken past? Will past sinfulness continue to work its destructive way, or, with God's grace, will the vision of reconciliation and the possibility of a transformed future find root in the present?

God's promise that someone from David's line will reign over his people is made eternal in the resurrection of his Son (born of the house of David). He is the ultimate head of God's people. Truth and reconciliation, whether in South Africa or elsewhere, can take lasting shape only if they are understood by people to be joined in Christ, the head of the church.

Jeremiah 34:1–22

WHILE NEBUCHADNEZZAR KING of Babylon and all his army and all the kingdoms and peoples in the empire he ruled were fighting against Jerusalem and all its surrounding towns, this word came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²"This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: Go to Zedekiah king of Judah and tell him, 'This is what the LORD says: I am about to hand this city over to the king of Babylon, and he will burn it down. ³You will not escape from his grasp but will surely be captured and handed over to him. You will see the king of Babylon with your own eyes, and he will speak with you face to face. And you will go to Babylon.

⁴"Yet hear the promise of the LORD, O Zedekiah king of Judah. This is what the LORD says concerning you: You will not die by the sword; ⁵you will die peacefully. As people made a funeral fire in honor of your fathers, the former kings who preceded you, so they will make a fire in your honor and lament, "Alas, O master!" I myself make this promise, declares the LORD."

⁶Then Jeremiah the prophet told all this to Zedekiah king of Judah, in Jerusalem, ⁷while the army of the king of Babylon was fighting against Jerusalem and the other cities of Judah that were still holding out—Lachish and Azekah. These were the only fortified cities left in Judah.

⁸The word came to Jeremiah from the LORD after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people in Jerusalem to proclaim freedom for the slaves. ⁹Everyone was to free his Hebrew slaves, both male and female; no one was to hold a fellow Jew in bondage. ¹⁰So all the officials and people who

entered into this covenant agreed that they would free their male and female slaves and no longer hold them in bondage. They agreed, and set them free. ¹¹But afterward they changed their minds and took back the slaves they had freed and enslaved them again.

¹²Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: 13"This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I made a covenant with your forefathers when I brought them out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. I said, ¹⁴ Every seventh year each of you must free any fellow Hebrew who has sold himself to you. After he has served you six years, you must let him go free.' Your fathers, however, did not listen to me or pay attention to me. ¹⁵Recently you repented and did what is right in my sight: Each of you proclaimed freedom to his countrymen. You even made a covenant before me in the house that bears my Name. ¹⁶But now you have turned around and profaned my name; each of you has taken back the male and female slaves you had set free to go where they wished. You have forced them to become your slaves again.

17"Therefore, this is what the LORD says: You have not obeyed me; you have not proclaimed freedom for your fellow countrymen. So I now proclaim 'freedom' for you, declares the LORD—'freedom' to fall by the sword, plague and famine. I will make you abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth. ¹⁸The men who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before me, I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces. ¹⁹The leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the court officials, the priests and all the people of the land who walked between the pieces of the calf, ²⁰I will hand over to

their enemies who seek their lives. Their dead bodies will become food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth.

²¹"I will hand Zedekiah king of Judah and his officials over to their enemies who seek their lives, to the army of the king of Babylon, which has withdrawn from you. ²²I am going to give the order, declares the LORD, and I will bring them back to this city. They will fight against it, take it and burn it down. And I will lay waste the towns of Judah so no one can live there."

Original Meaning

CHAPTER 34 IS PART of a series of narratives about the siege and fall of Jerusalem. It is linked with chapters 32–33 by the common setting of the Babylonian siege during Zedekiah's reign, although chapters 32–33 are also typically grouped with chapters 30–31 as part of the theme of restoration. A date sometime in 588 B.C. or early 587 fits the historical context of the events narrated in chapter 34. Chapter 35 is set in the time of King Jehoiakim, several years earlier, so its contents are related to chapter 34 by the theme of Judah's failures, not that of chronology.

The narrative in chapter 34 has two primary parts. Verses 1–5 are a word from the Lord to Jerusalem and Zedekiah, and verses 8–22 report an emancipation ceremony (lit., a covenant) for Judean slaves and a subsequent reneging on the proclamation by slave owners. The failure of the people to honor their covenant oath becomes the occasion for the Lord again to announce his judgment on Judah, Jerusalem, and Zedekiah.

34:1–5. This passage should be read in the context of 38:17–18; 39:7; 52:8–11; and 2 Kings 25:1–7. The fate of Zedekiah and of the city and nation are bound together. The statements about the future should be understood as announcements contingent on the reactions of king and people to the Babylonian siege. Verses 2–3 voice a familiar word of judgment on the city and its king. Their present course of disaster will lead (as it were) inevitably to a tragic conclusion. Verses 4–5, likewise, should be understood as contingent on some response of Zedekiah, even at this late

date. Although not formulated in the classical form of a call to repentance, these prophecies indicate the possible mitigation of the king's threatening circumstances.

Later on, Zedekiah was captured while fleeing the besieged city. His last days were spent in darkness because the Babylonians blinded him—a cruel act that came after the execution of members of his family (39:5–7). One should note the information provided in 34:21. It is a commentary (an update) on the word to Zedekiah in 34:4–5, perhaps anticipating the king's continuing recalcitrance and his sorry fate. Zedekiah's actions condemned him to the same fate as the rebellious city.

34:6–7. These verses seem to be an incidental comment regarding the timing of Jeremiah's communication to Zedekiah. As a result of archaeological work, however, they have become an interesting commentary on the formation of the book. According to verses 6–7, the two cities of Azekah and Lachish were still holding out against the Babylonian forces when Jeremiah made his prophecies to Zedekiah. The site of ancient Lachish is at modern *Tell ed Duweir* in the Shephelah hills southwest of Jerusalem. During the 1930s an expedition sponsored by the British School of Archaeology excavated at the site. Near the gate and near the interior fortress the excavation team found several ostraca (letters written on pottery shards) from stratum II, dating from the time of Jeremiah. One of the letters states that the signals from Azekah, located a few kilometers to the north of Lachish, could no longer be seen.

34:8–22. King Zedekiah had initiated a covenant with his subjects regarding their Judean slaves, that they were to be set free. The reason is not stated, but most likely the dire circumstances of the Babylonian siege lay behind the ceremony. Some scholars have speculated that with the scarcity of food, the manumission of the slaves meant that the owners were no longer obligated to feed them. It is also possible that freed slaves were more likely to defend their freedom in the struggle with Babylon. In any case, after the release of the slaves circumstances apparently improved enough so that the solemn oath of the covenant was broken and the slaves were taken back by their owners. Apparently there was a temporary lifting of the siege (cf. 37:7–8). This is the best interpretation of the comment in 34:21–22 that the Lord will "bring ... back" the Babylonian army that "has withdrawn."

No context or background is given for the first acquisitions of the slaves, but their enslavement is primarily debt related. Debts and warfare were the two most common reasons for someone to become a slave in antiquity. In a caustic response to the events, God (through Jeremiah) alludes to the debt-slavery laws of Deuteronomy 15² and perhaps also to the custom of a royal proclamation of "freedom" (*deror*) from indebtedness.³ In the indictment for breaking their word and reenslaving the slaves, the people are also accused of breaking the covenant God made with them when he brought them out of Egypt. Verse 14 includes the just treatment of slaves (and thus the allusion to Deut. 15) as part of the covenant obligations assumed by Israel. The verse also states categorically that Israel has not met that obligation adequately.

Scholars debate whether the covenant release of Jeremiah 34:8–22 was part of the sabbatical (i.e., seven-year) cycle of debt forgiveness mandated by Deuteronomy 15 or part of a special freedom proclamation initiated by King Zedekiah (on analogy with Assyrian and Babylonian rulers) as a response to the crisis of the siege. One cannot be dogmatic in these matters, but perhaps the role of Zedekiah in making the covenant with the people tips the balance toward a special royal proclamation rather than the regular sabbatical release. In either case, the covenant ceremony is carried out at the temple (v. 15). This is a solemn context in which to make an oath or ratify a promise, since it brings the presence of the Lord to the process.

The allusion to Deuteronomy 15 in Jeremiah 34:14–15 is also important to understanding God's anger over the injustice done to the slaves, since the pentateuchal legislation links the obligation of justice toward slaves with the content of the covenant stipulations given to their ancestors. Jeremiah underscores this same dynamic. The ancestors of the Judeans were slaves in Egypt, and God brought them out of the house of slavery. God has not gone back on his good word and work, so neither should the slave owners in Judah.

The indictment of the people contains a play on the word $d^e ror$ (34:8, 15, 17). If the people can "proclaim freedom" for the slaves, only to take them back when it is convenient, then God will "proclaim freedom" for Judah and Jerusalem. Readers will detect the sarcasm in this proclamation easily enough. God's freedom proclamation to Judah and Jerusalem is "freedom"

to fall to Babylon. In this announcement of judgment, the punishment to come fits the crime. There is a link between crime and punishment.

Verses 18–19 refer to the owners and officials who pass between the parts of the calf; this probably indicates a self-imprecation and promissory oath as part of the solemn covenant ceremony. The best parallel to the report comes in Genesis 15:7–21, where Abram prepares for a sacrificial ceremony by slaying the proper animals and dividing their carcasses. In such ceremonies, those who walked between the parts of the slain animals enacted symbolically their passing through death and dismemberment as a pledge to keep their word. "Passing through the pieces" thus became a symbolic act to bind the word of promise as an imprecatory oath. Since the Judeans passed between the parts of the calf when making an oath to free the slaves but subsequently did not keep their word, they themselves will be like the sacrificial animals.

Bridging Contexts

Crisis Morality. Jeremiah 34, with all its specificity regarding time and circumstances, raises the issue of crisis conversions or what some people call "deathbed confessions." Desperate circumstances can lead to desperate measures. As noted, the emancipation of the slaves during Zedekiah's reign was apparently prompted by the harsh circumstances of the Babylonian siege. Apparently the obligations the owners had to their slaves were not carried out fairly in the past (34:13–15), so why enact a covenant ceremony now? It is hard to escape the conclusion that the ceremony was one of desperation, carried out because of the grim circumstances of the city. Was this inherently wrong? Nothing in the text indicates that the ceremony itself was wrong; if anything, the text implies that the emancipation was long overdue (cf. 34:15). The point seems to be that there really was no conversion, only desperation.

The covenant God granted Israel at Mount Sinai obligated the people to certain norms of behavior toward God and one another. Obedience, however, was not only an act but also a matter of the heart (and soul). Neither an individual nor a group honors God solely with outward obedience, although obedience is a key indicator of a person or group's true allegiance. For Judah in Zedekiah's day, it was not a case of learning

something new about God's covenant stipulations but of carrying them out as a means to honor God. The people made a solemn promise before God to treat their slaves fairly and to grant them freedom. This is a dynamic that crosses time and culture regardless of the particular issue under consideration. God is served and honored when his claim on his people is demonstrated through their obedience to his revealed will.

Slavery. Slavery was an accepted institution in ancient Israel. Most slaves in the ancient Near East became such through indebtedness or capture in war (not kidnapping, as was the case for Africans brought to the United States). The stipulations about slavery in the Old Testament are mostly about ways to ameliorate the conditions of servitude and/or ways to treat slaves (servants) humanely. It should be noted that God is on the side of the slaves, not on the side of the crass owners. Of course, the indebtedness incurred by slaves had to be dealt with fairly, but the indebted persons themselves were expected to receive just treatment.

Contemporary Significance

PROMISE KEEPERS, THEN and now. On October 4, 1997, close to a million men gathered in Washington, D.C., to proclaim themselves Promise Keepers for the Lord. Bill McCartney, formerly a college football coach at the University of Colorado, began a ministry seven years previously for men, which grew in a few years to become a large and influential ministry. The premise of the evangelical organization known as The Promise Keepers is that men should ground their Christian faith in their responsibilities to love their wives and children. McCartney has also made a strong push to overcome the effects of racism in Christian organizations by reaching out to men of different color and ethnic origins. Moreover, in this movement there is a strong emphasis on repentance from past failures to live up to God's standards and to trust in Jesus Christ to change a man's life.

It is an amazing commentary on modern life when public interest groups question both the motives and the values of the Promise Keepers. Particularly strident have been the comments from the National Organization of Women. Its president stated on national television that the goals of Promise Keepers were detrimental to the freedom and health of women and that the movement was a servant to "right-wing causes." How

odd! The stated purpose of Promise Keepers is to call men to be obedient to the claims of the gospel and to take godly responsibility for their lives and those of their families. These principles are not new; they are basic evangelical tenets and classical Christian teaching.

In a perceptive comment published in national newspapers, Martin Marty (professor of church history at the University of Chicago) said that perhaps the Promise Keepers were simply who they said they were: men seeking to be faithful to the gospel by keeping promises made before God to be responsible in their spheres of influence (family, work, society). Such men are not antiwomen, right-wing zealots, or puppets for sinister causes; after all, the core tenets of the movement are conservative in nature. Marty's point is an important one in a time when all commitments and allegiances seem only temporary or to have strings attached. One need not agree with all the theological underpinnings of the Promise Keepers movement to see the value of keeping commitments made before God.

Such debate illustrates the cost of discipleship for Christians as well as the nature of social commitments in a highly individualistic culture. Obedience to God will look strange in a world dedicated to individual freedom and moral relativism. In such a world people will look for their advantage and see a plot wherever people are living in a community of faith and acting out of moral conviction.

But a community of faithful obedience is what God has called his people to be. It is always easier to undergo a public ritual of moral and spiritual obligation (like a covenant before God to release slaves in Jeremiah's day or the signing of a statement of Christian outrage over the abuse of children) than it is to keep a promise made before God and to carry through one's obligation. But God has called his people to be people of their (and his) word. Repentance and embracing the gospel are not negative acts but positive, joyful responses to a higher calling. God is the ultimate Promise Keeper. God's people are called to honor him by keeping their commitments made in his name.

One wonders what later historians will say of the tumultuous social changes that have swept through much of the Western world (and affected other parts of the globe as well) in the last half of the twentieth century. Surely the accelerated pace of change itself will be seen as one of the remarkable characteristics of the period. Perhaps future generations will be

making the necessary adaptations to cope with the pace of societal changes. Change seems to dictate for many people that they keep their options open, that they try to remain flexible, and that they make no commitments unless an easy point of extrication is identified. Perhaps the Christians of the future will have the courage of conviction to point out that promises, divine and human, are the rock on which all relationships stand.

Jeremiah 35:1–19

THIS IS THE word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD during the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah: ²"Go to the Recabite family and invite them to come to one of the side rooms of the house of the LORD and give them wine to drink."

³So I went to get Jaazaniah son of Jeremiah, the son of Habazziniah, and his brothers and all his sons—the whole family of the Recabites. ⁴I brought them into the house of the LORD, into the room of the sons of Hanan son of Igdaliah the man of God. It was next to the room of the officials, which was over that of Maaseiah son of Shallum the doorkeeper. ⁵Then I set bowls full of wine and some cups before the men of the Recabite family and said to them, "Drink some wine."

⁶But they replied, "We do not drink wine, because our forefather Jonadab son of Recab gave us this command: 'Neither you nor your descendants must ever drink wine. ⁷Also you must never build houses, sow seed or plant vineyards; you must never have any of these things, but must always live in tents. Then you will live a long time in the land where you are nomads.' 8We have obeyed everything our forefather Jonadab son of Recab commanded us. Neither we nor our wives nor our sons and daughters have ever drunk wine ⁹or built houses to live in or had vineyards, fields or crops. ¹⁰We have lived in tents and have fully obeyed everything our forefather Jonadab commanded us. ¹¹But when Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon invaded this land, we said, 'Come, we must go to Jerusalem to escape the Babylonian and Aramean armies.' So we have remained in Jerusalem."

¹²Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, saying: ¹³"This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Go and tell the men of Judah and the people of Jerusalem, 'Will you not learn a lesson and obey my words?' declares the LORD. 14'Jonadab son of Recab ordered his sons not to drink wine and this command has been kept. To this day they do not drink wine, because they obey their forefather's command. But I have spoken to you again and again, yet you have not obeyed me. ¹⁵Again and again I sent all my servants the prophets to you. They said, "Each of you must turn from your wicked ways and reform your actions; do not follow other gods to serve them. Then you will live in the land I have given to you and your fathers." But you have not paid attention or listened to me. ¹⁶The descendants of Jonadab son of Recab have carried out the command their forefather gave them, but these people have not obeyed me.'

17"Therefore, this is what the LORD God Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'Listen! I am going to bring on Judah and on everyone living in Jerusalem every disaster I pronounced against them. I spoke to them, but they did not listen; I called to them, but they did not answer.'"

¹⁸Then Jeremiah said to the family of the Recabites, "This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'You have obeyed the command of your forefather Jonadab and have followed all his instructions and have done everything he ordered.' ¹⁹Therefore, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'Jonadab son of Recab will never fail to have a man to serve me.'"

CHAPTER 35 IS set in the reign of King Jehoiakim (609–598 B.C), a period earlier than the events described in the previous chapter. Nevertheless, the two chapters have a common theme (the significance of obedience to one's word) and a common setting (Jerusalem and pressure from outside forces).

This chapter has two major parts. In verses 1–11 God commands Jeremiah to go to the Recabites and to bring them to the temple complex. He commands them to drink wine, and they protest. In verses 12–19 God commands Jeremiah to speak hard words to Judah and Jerusalem, based on the prophet's interaction with the Recabites. The prophet contrasts Recabite obedience to communal standards with the faithlessness of Judah and Jerusalem.

35:1–11. Uncertainty remains over how best to describe the Recabites.¹ Some scholars have seen them as an anti-Canaanite faction and also as conservative representatives of a "nomadic ideal" from Israel's past. This is due mainly to their rejection of wine, agriculture, and houses (cf. 35:6–10), plus the account in 2 Kings 10 that links Jonadab, the founder of the Recabites, with Jehu's revolt against the Omrides. Others have seen them more as an alternative community or commercial guild associated with the design and building of chariots. The Hebrew term *rkb* means "(to) ride," and the noun *merkaba* refers to a chariot. Since the Kenites (to whom the Recabites are related; 1 Chron. 2:55) may have been smiths, the combination of name and possible vocation suggests the possibility that the Recabites were itinerant metalworkers.

Verse 3 raises an interesting question with respect to the formation of the Recabite community. Jeremiah reports that he went to Jaazaniah, the head of the community, to offer them the opportunity to drink wine. That community is comprised of Jaazaniah's brothers and sons, "the whole family of the Recabites." One cannot tell from this description whether the community is literally comprised of Jaazaniah's biological extended family or whether the kinship terminology of brothers and sons serves to identify a close-knit community. Jonadab, the founder of the Recabites, is described as the group's "forefather" in verse 8. Literally, the term can be translated as "father" ('ab in Heb.).

Whatever the origin of the Recabites, their constancy regarding their community's values becomes a prophetically appropriated sign against the lack of integrity in Judah and Jerusalem. According to their self-

designation, Recabites do not live in houses, plant crops, or drink wine. Instead, they live in tents (and apparently trade goods for grain and other agricultural products). Their presence in Jerusalem is the result of pressure put on the Judean countryside by the Babylonian army and their Aramean companions (v. 11). Jerusalem is a place of refuge for them because of its stout walls. This indicates that otherwise the Recabites would normally have lived in tents outside the city in obedience to the command of their founder, Jonadab.

The prophetic symbolism of the account is accentuated by the scene of wine cups set before the Recabites in the chambers of Hanan's sons (v. 4; their family was founded by Igdaliah, "a man of God" = prophet). Their reply—that they do not drink wine—is narrated for the effect such a scene will have on the larger community of Judah and Jerusalem.

35:12–19. God instructs Jeremiah to report the encounter with the Recabites to the people of Judah and Jerusalem. The fact that Jeremiah has invited the Recabites to meet him at a room near the temple (v. 4) ensures that they are observed by other members of the community. The incident contrasts Recabite obedience to their community standards with the faithlessness of Judeans to theirs. It is part of a history of disobedience, for Judah has consistently disobeyed the word of God's servants, the prophets (v. 15). The prophetic communication, therefore, concludes that a call to repentance is neither timely nor warranted. God spoke (in the past), but Judah did not listen; he called, but they did not answer.

The final word of the chapter is addressed to the Recabites. They are promised that they will always have someone to "stand before" the Lord; that is, they will never be forgotten by God, and their place with him is secure.⁴

Bridging Contexts

THE LESSON OF THE RECABITES. Surprisingly, nothing directly is said about the piety of the Recabites, although one can safely assume that they believe in the Lord, the God of Israel. The main issue, rather, is obedience to a lifestyle to which the Recabite community has committed itself. That the Recabites pursue their lifestyle as part of their piety is clear by the chapter's conclusion, but the emphasis is on their constancy and commitment to the

integrity of their community. The particulars of their vows are not universally applicable in Jeremiah's day any more than they would be in modern times. Houses, for example, are neither good nor bad in themselves; but the manner in which houses are used is a moral and spiritual matter. The same can be said of wine, vineyards, and fields. Jeremiah was not a Recabite. Moreover, he owned property, probably lived in a house, and probably drank wine. He affirms the Recabite lifestyle without himself being bound by its requirements.

The Recabites, therefore, pursue their communal ideals within a society that has not adopted all of their ways. Some of their activities may have been related to the particulars of their vocation. If, for example, they itinerated as smiths, their avoidance of houses (or house ownership) is understandable. They may also have carried out certain responsibilities as part of a vow of dedication to the Lord, and their service may have related them to prophets or priests in ways not preserved for later readers. They may have functioned like Nazirites, who took certain vows of abstinence as part of a community ideal.

Nevertheless, their value as an example for Judah may be like that of the "unjust steward" in Jesus' parable (Luke 16:1–13), who is praised for his industry and shrewdness (16:8), even if the particulars of his actions are not to be emulated. Obedience to the community's standards, even if the broader populace is indifferent or hostile, is the key characteristic of the Recabites. This kind of commitment can be understood by an individual or a church in a variety of settings.

Contemporary Significance

CHRIST AND CULTURE. Just after World War II, H. Richard Niebuhr published a series of essays on the subject of Christian faith as it is defined and exercised in a cultural context.⁵ It has become something of a classic in Western Christianity because it takes up an issue central to Christian faith: How does the church offer its witness within its cultural context? In the volume Niebuhr takes up five different models of the relationship between Christian faith and its cultural context: Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ the transformer of culture. Since the shape of corporate human existence varies

so dramatically, the response of Christian faith to and within any particular culture may also vary. The relationship, however, between faith and culture is symbiotic. There is no cultureless Christianity any more than there is cultureless human existence. In any given context, the issue turns on the exercise of faithful living on the part of the believing community.

In recent years, especially in the evangelical communities of North America, one hears the expression "culture wars" being used to describe the polarizing debates in Western society about morality and education. Since Christians have convictions about morality and education that can run counter to the relativistic pluralism endemic to Western culture, the issue of Christian witness in society is a "hot topic."

Several things can be said about the nature of faithful witness on the basis of Jeremiah 35 (and the book of Jeremiah as a whole). (1) Faith in God is expressed by living in community with other believers. The community of faith (i.e., the church) helps give shape not only to what one believes but how one lives responsibly as a result of faith. (2) God has called people to lead public lives of obedience to his revealed will. Obedience is not just pleasing to God; it can be an effective witness to the larger culture in which believers find themselves. (3) The exercise of the Christian faith may entail giving up certain practices common to a culture for the sake of the gospel.

To separate or not to separate. Separation from society is not by definition a good thing or a bad thing for Christians; like so many other things, the value of separation depends on the motives and circumstances of the community that separates itself. In Roman Catholicism and the Eastern Orthodox churches, orders and monasteries give expression to the devotion of prayer, holiness, seclusion, and service to God. Protestants of various persuasions have not often followed this model, preferring instead to engage society more directly with the claims of the gospel. Perhaps a Protestant or free-church analogy to the Recabites would be the Amish—Mennonite pacifists who live in communities that forego certain characteristics of modern life in order to serve God more faithfully.

A visit to a monastery, however, often reminds Christians (whether Catholic or not) how influenced they are by the society and culture in which they live. The Amish (Pennsylvania Dutch as some have called them) are heirs of the radical Reformation movements in Europe of the sixteenth and

seventeenth centuries. In the radically pluralistic North American culture, these Christian pacifists have refused to participate in segments of the larger institutional life of the United States because those elements divert them from pursuing their path of discipleship and communal life. Instead, they practice a form of corporate discipline and separateness that reflects well on their commitments.

The shape of the monastic life, the discipline of an order dedicated to the service of God, or the influence of alternative Christian communities can serve as effective witnesses to the power of God in directing his people to fulfill their calling as disciples. In any case, it is a great question to ask: Just what are the marks of the church that announce its commitments within the broader culture in which it takes root?

In 1993 the horror of the Branch Davidian separatists was revealed to the world. A self-appointed leader, David Koresh, named a farmstead near Waco, Texas, as *Ranch Apocalypse*. His followers separated themselves from the evils of society to follow him. The community had discipline, strict rules about behavior, and time set aside for worship and teaching from the Bible. Many of the community's members simply wanted to live in a Christian community untainted by the world and uncompromising in its commitments to uphold the word of God.

So what went so tragically wrong? The people were misled by Koresh, who saw himself as a messiah⁶ and whose authority was used to twist biblical teaching and to engage in sexual relations with many of the women in the community. Instead of a holy love, he used fear to motivate his flock. Instead of pointing to Christ as the cornerstone of faith, he pointed to himself as the interpreter of God's will. In April 1993, the community was largely consumed by fire that broke out when the FBI bungled a raid on the Ranch headquarters.

The Branch Davidians (and other groups could be named) are testimony that a strong, religiously based community is not infallible. Neither the Recabites of old nor more modern counterparts reflect perfection. One can cite examples of both healthy and sick communities that seek to bind themselves to a religious ideal. Obedience to fundamental values is in and of itself instructive. But how much more pleasing to God is joyful obedience to the kingdom values revealed in his Son!

The Recabites lived according to the standards of their founder. They did so as faithfully as they could, depending on the circumstances of the society in which they lived. It seems too simple to say, but the church is called to the same task. Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, is the foundation of the community of faith we call the church. The life of the church provides a witness to the larger society, whether it withdraws in protest or actively engages its cultural context. The promise of the risen Lord is even grander than that of God to the Recabites, for the gates of hell will not prevail against the community that confesses Christ.

Jeremiah 36:1–32

IN THE FOURTH year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²"Take a scroll and write on it all the words I have spoken to you concerning Israel, Judah and all the other nations from the time I began speaking to you in the reign of Josiah till now. ³Perhaps when the people of Judah hear about every disaster I plan to inflict on them, each of them will turn from his wicked way; then I will forgive their wickedness and their sin."

⁴So Jeremiah called Baruch son of Neriah, and while Jeremiah dictated all the words the LORD had spoken to him, Baruch wrote them on the scroll. ⁵Then Jeremiah told Baruch, "I am restricted; I cannot go to the LORD's temple. ⁶So you go to the house of the LORD on a day of fasting and read to the people from the scroll the words of the LORD that you wrote as I dictated. Read them to all the people of Judah who come in from their towns. ⁷Perhaps they will bring their petition before the LORD, and each will turn from his wicked ways, for the anger and wrath pronounced against this people by the LORD are great."

⁸Baruch son of Neriah did everything Jeremiah the prophet told him to do; at the LORD's temple he read the words of the LORD from the scroll. ⁹In the ninth month of the fifth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, a time of fasting before the LORD was proclaimed for all the people in Jerusalem and those who had come from the towns of Judah. ¹⁰From the room of Gemariah son of Shaphan the secretary, which was in the upper courtyard at the entrance of the New Gate of the

temple, Baruch read to all the people at the LORD's temple the words of Jeremiah from the scroll.

Shaphan, heard all the words of the LORD from the scroll, ¹²he went down to the secretary's room in the royal palace, where all the officials were sitting: Elishama the secretary, Delaiah son of Shemaiah, Elnathan son of Acbor, Gemariah son of Shaphan, Zedekiah son of Hananiah, and all the other officials. ¹³After Micaiah told them everything he had heard Baruch read to the people from the scroll, ¹⁴all the officials sent Jehudi son of Nethaniah, the son of Shelemiah, the son of Cushi, to say to Baruch, "Bring the scroll from which you have read to the people and come." So Baruch son of Neriah went to them with the scroll in his hand. ¹⁵They said to him, "Sit down, please, and read it to us."

So Baruch read it to them. ¹⁶When they heard all these words, they looked at each other in fear and said to Baruch, "We must report all these words to the king." ¹⁷Then they asked Baruch, "Tell us, how did you come to write all this? Did Jeremiah dictate it?"

¹⁸"Yes," Baruch replied, "he dictated all these words to me, and I wrote them in ink on the scroll."

¹⁹Then the officials said to Baruch, "You and Jeremiah, go and hide. Don't let anyone know where you are."

²⁰After they put the scroll in the room of Elishama the secretary, they went to the king in the courtyard and reported everything to him. ²¹The king sent Jehudi to get the scroll, and Jehudi brought it from the room of Elishama the secretary and read it to the king and all the officials standing beside him. ²²It was the ninth month and the king was sitting in the winter apartment, with a fire burning in the firepot

in front of him. ²³Whenever Jehudi had read three or four columns of the scroll, the king cut them off with a scribe's knife and threw them into the firepot, until the entire scroll was burned in the fire. ²⁴The king and all his attendants who heard all these words showed no fear, nor did they tear their clothes. ²⁵Even though Elnathan, Delaiah and Gemariah urged the king not to burn the scroll, he would not listen to them. ²⁶Instead, the king commanded Jerahmeel, a son of the king, Seraiah son of Azriel and Shelemiah son of Abdeel to arrest Baruch the scribe and Jeremiah the prophet. But the LORD had hidden them.

²⁷After the king burned the scroll containing the words that Baruch had written at Jeremiah's dictation, the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: ²⁸"Take another scroll and write on it all the words that were on the first scroll, which Jehoiakim king of Judah burned up. ²⁹Also tell Jehoiakim king of Judah, 'This is what the LORD says: You burned that scroll and said, "Why did you write on it that the king of Babylon would certainly come and destroy this land and cut off both men and animals from it?" ³⁰Therefore, this is what the LORD says about Jehoiakim king of Judah: He will have no one to sit on the throne of David; his body will be thrown out and exposed to the heat by day and the frost by night. ³¹I will punish him and his children and his attendants for their wickedness; I will bring on them and those living in Jerusalem and the people of Judah every disaster I pronounced against them, because they have not listened.""

³²So Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to the scribe Baruch son of Neriah, and as Jeremiah dictated, Baruch wrote on it all the words of the scroll that Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire. And many similar words were added to them.

Original Meaning

THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS yet another account of Jehoiakim's failure. Two precise dates are given (36:1, 9), which span about a year in Jeremiah's personal history and which also place the events in the context of a broader history of the Babylonian threat to Judah. Several officials in Jerusalem are named (36:10–12, 26), thereby giving a context to the account for later Judean readers. The conclusion to the account, however, points beyond the circumstances of Jeremiah and Baruch, his scribal companion; the callous response of King Jehoiakim to the words of Jeremiah indicate Judah's disobedience (rejection) of God's message to the nation.

36:1–7. Jehoiakim's fourth year (36:1) is 605 B.C.² In that year Nabopolassar, the ruler of Babylon, died; his young son, Nebuchadnezzar, ascended the Babylonian throne, and his forces defeated the Egyptians in battle at Carchemish. Since Jehoiakim had been placed on the throne in Judah by the Egyptians (2 Kings 23:34–37), this defeat was potentially an ominous sign for him and the Judean leadership. Jeremiah 25:1 bears the same date as the heading to a chapter of judgmental sayings against Jerusalem and Judah.

Just why Jeremiah had been banned from preaching in the temple is a mystery (36:5). Since his words were often judgmental and divisive, a restriction on his preaching in the temple precincts could have come at almost any time in the reign of Jehoiakim. Possibly the temple sermon Jeremiah delivered at the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign (26:1; cf. ch. 7) led to his restriction from delivering oracles at that site. It should be recalled that Jeremiah narrowly escaped a lynch mob at that time. Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, stood on the prophet's side in that setting (26:24). In the narrative of chapter 36, other descendants of Shaphan are instrumental in Baruch's delivery of Jeremiah's words (36:10–12; cf. 29:3). The influential family of Shaphan appears sympathetic to Jeremiah, and its members may be part of the largely anonymous group who have preserved the words of the prophet.

Baruch is a scribe (36:26); that is, his profession is in recording and interpreting documents.³ In a way he is a disciple of Jeremiah. Since Jeremiah is restricted from preaching in the temple precincts, Baruch is commissioned with delivering the prophet's message in the temple. This comes, however, after Baruch has copied Jeremiah's oracles onto a scroll. He knows the material intimately and is able to represent the prophet in his absence.

Here readers encounter another theme of the chapter. The written scroll of Jeremiah's prophecies is an adequate substitute for the living voice of the prophet. Baruch's brother Seraiah also assisted Jeremiah in delivering prophecy to Babylon (51:59–64). Probably scribal activity was a family profession; both the father and grandfather of Baruch and Seraiah are named (51:59), as if the family and its work were well known in Judah.

Jeremiah hopes that the hard words he wants delivered to the people will be a catalyst for repentance and change (36:7). Ominously, the possibility of repentance is not mentioned in the summary statements of 36:27–31. One function of the narrative in chapter 36 is to confirm the obduracy of Judean leadership and even the collective will of the people.

36:8–19. In the ninth month of Jehoiakim's fifth year (i.e., December 604 B.C.), a solemn fast is declared, and many people in Judah stream to the temple to pray (v. 9).⁴ This is a year or so later than the chronological notice in 36:1. The solemn fast becomes the occasion for Baruch to deliver the prophetic message of Jeremiah. At this time Nebuchadnezzar's army was on the Palestinian coast, and the Philistine city of Ashkelon was sacked by the Babylonians. The text does not say why the fast is called, so the link with the ominous arrival of the Babylonians is speculative, but some perceived threat prompts this assembly. Another possibility is the effects of a prolonged drought.⁵

A close reading of the text shows that the words of the scroll delivered orally by Baruch are accorded the same prophetic authority as that of Jeremiah. Baruch is asked in an initial interrogation whether these are the words from the mouth of Jeremiah; he replies that they are (36:17–18). Pointedly, the narrator (Baruch?) gives no account of the people's reaction to Baruch's oral recital in verse 10. He seems to assume that the words are familiar and that the people have not responded as hoped, although the words of the scroll aimed for repentance (36:3). The only one described as

hearing anything at the temple is Micaiah the son of Gemariah, the son of Shaphan, who "heard all the words of the *LORD* from the scroll" (36:11, italics added). This detail is not coincidental. The chain of authority runs backward from Baruch to Jeremiah to the Lord. The prophetic word rejected by the people is ultimately that of the Lord.

It is unlikely that the officials named in Jer. 36:10–14 are simply listed for verisimilitude. On the one hand, they represent Judean leadership. On the other, some of them represent people sympathetic to Jeremiah. Gemariah has taken a big risk in allowing Baruch to use his office as the location for preaching to the crowds in the temple courtyard (v. 10). This suggests that he, like his sibling Ahikam (26:24), has heard something authentic in Jeremiah's preaching. His risk is consistent with what is known elsewhere about his family. His father and brother were cabinet-level officials under Josiah, and they were involved in the discovery of the book of the law and its promulgation (2 Kings 22).

After hearing for themselves the contents of the prophetic scroll, the officials request that Baruch and Jeremiah go into hiding. In taking that advice, Baruch and Jeremiah may have preserved their lives until the turmoil around the oracles dies down a bit (see below).

36:20–26. The callous rejection of Jeremiah's words by Jehoiakim is described in a manner intended to remind readers of his father Josiah and to contrast father and son. When Josiah heard the words of the book of the Torah, a book discovered during temple repairs, he tore (Heb. *qr*) his garments as a sign that he recognized the authority of the prophetic scroll to judge him and his nation (2 Kings 22). In contemptuous fashion, Jehoiakim cuts (Heb. *qr*) the scroll in pieces and does not rend his garments (Jer. 36:23–24).

The use of a knife to cut the scroll probably indicates a scroll that contained more than one piece of tanned animal skin. Typically sections of tanned animal skins (probably that of a lamb) were sewn together to make a continuous roll for written contents. The easiest way for Jehoiakim (or anyone else) to cut a scroll would be to slice along the join of two sections where thread held them together. If this is correct, this also indicates that Baruch has copied a number of different oracles for presentation to the temple crowds.

36:27–32. Jehoiakim and Judah's fate is sealed by their indifference and even hostility to the prophetic word. According to 26:20–23, Jehoiakim became upset with the preaching activity of Uriah and sent a delegation to Egypt to arrest him. Subsequently, Uriah was executed for his prophetic activity. Baruch's reading of Jeremiah's scroll is the second recorded time that the prophet's words have been given at the temple and incite consternation; the delegation to arrest Baruch and Jeremiah may not itself have been empowered to execute the two men, but had they been found, execution may have been the conclusion to their arrest. The narrator notes, almost in passing, that the Lord had hidden them.

One supposes that the Lord's command to compile another scroll comes while Jeremiah and Baruch are hiding from the royal officials searching for them. Along with the command comes a revelation to Jeremiah that judgment will come particularly on Jehoiakim and that it will be extended broadly to Judah and Jerusalem. No mention is made of any hope that they will repent.

The second scroll is longer than the first. Its contents are not otherwise revealed except to say that the additions are similar to what was included in the first scroll.

Bridging Contexts

FUNCTIONS OF JUDGMENT PROPHECY. A primary claim of the chapter is that judgment is coming on Jerusalem and Judah for their failure to heed the word of the Lord. Since this is a common claim in Jeremiah, one must look more closely at the particulars of chapter 36. Initially, the word from God to Jeremiah contains a hope that the people will repent. As the narrative progresses, it becomes evident that no repentance is forthcoming. Thus, two of the functions of judgmental prophecy are set forth: It is usually designed to evoke change among God's people, and when change is not forthcoming, the prophecy indicates the consequences of disobedience.

Authority of a prophetic word. This account also emphasizes the authority of a prophetic word even when the prophet himself or herself is absent. As with the discovered scroll in 2 Kings 22, the king and people are called to hear a timely word from the Lord whether the human "author" is present or absent. This emphasis has probably shaped this account as it was

intended for early readers (who did not know Jeremiah), but who were asked to affirm that God had spoken through him. The issue, therefore, is not access to an inspired personality (whether prophet or apostle), but recognition that God stands behind his word given to a human vessel.

Hearing the word. Jeremiah 36 also gives a somber and ironic account of worship at the temple. People have come there to fast and pray, apparently out of fear for the future direction of the nation. A solemn fast, almost by definition, includes calls for repentance. Indeed, the very word they need to hear is provided for them, but they lack the corporate will and spiritual discernment to hear it. What an illustration of Jesus' trademark saying: "Whoever has ears to hear ..." (cf. Matt. 11:15; 13:13; John 5:24; 12:47; Rev. 3:20). In the disappointment over the word's reception, it is a blessing to note that some did hear. Micaiah "heard"; Baruch "heard."

One way of hearing Jeremiah 36 is to see its function like that of Acts 6:7–7:60. Stephen offers a witness to the people that is rebuffed. He suffers the ultimate rejection in that he is martyred for his prophetic stance. His word confirms the spiritual blindness of those who reject him. Eventually, however, his witness is confirmed in the life of one of those who persecuted him, namely, Saul of Tarsus (the apostle Paul). This is an important lesson for readers in any age: One cannot know the impact that his or her work will have, even if the initial reaction to it is negative. God may use that work in ways a disciple will never know.

Leadership. Leadership of the people is crucial for its life. Jehoiakim represents the kind of callous, amoral, arrogant, and spiritually dull leadership that is a disaster for God's people. The failure of its leadership is often a significant contribution to a systemic failure of the people. The narrator contrasts Jehoiakim with his father Josiah. Thanks be to God that there were other people of the time who had the courage to protect Jeremiah and Baruch and to follow the words that the Lord had given them.

Contemporary Significance

WORSHIP. In an oral interview some years ago Mother Teresa was asked about her "success." One wonders if "success" is the right word to use, though it is a term common to the news profession. Mother Teresa replied that she spent an hour a day in prayer and didn't "do anything that she knew

was wrong." Her answer was deceptively simple. Worship is intended as an encounter with God and to bring a person/group into closer relationship with God. One result of worship should be greater knowledge of God's will and motivation to do that will. Human nature being what it is (sinful), however, a person cannot simply will to do what is right or know infallibly what is right. It takes God at work in the lives of individuals and churches in order to bring them into more conformity with his will and purpose. Prayer that seeks God's will must also earnestly seek the strength of the Spirit to discern that will and empower seekers to carry it out.

In Christian terms the worship of God should lead to sanctification and holiness; to put it succinctly, the purpose of the Christian life is to become conformed to the image of God's Son, Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:28–30; Eph. 4:13–16). There is (or should be) a symbiosis between God, the one to whom worship and service are directed, and his people, who offer to him their worship and service. God gives more than guidance and comfort; through Jesus Christ and his Holy Spirit, God has given us a share in his divine life. Repentance is a biblical word that entails turning from a sinful orientation or activity and embracing God and doing his will.

The paradox of Jeremiah 36 is a people at worship who do not hear and who, therefore, do not respond to the word of instruction and change that God provides them. There is no repentance because there is no recognition that God has addressed them through the words of the prophetic scroll. The issue for Judah of old apparently was not their presence in worship—one gains the impression that many were there in the time of crisis. Rather, it was Judah's inability to see their failure before God and to seek fervently his assistance in changing their actions. A similar dilemma may take various shapes in individual lives and in portions of Christ's church. Attendance at worship is hardly even an acknowledgment that God exists or that his Word is reliable unless those who worship seek to glorify God through word and deed.

Obedience. A learned discussion about modern theology once concluded with a respondent's statement that "much about God is a mystery." Undoubtedly that is true. But the response of yet another partner in the discussion caught the predominant tone of the biblical witness in saying: "It is not what I don't know about God that troubles me; it is what I do know that impels me to action." There is no excuse for individuals or churches

being unresponsive to God's call to discipleship. God has declared his will and purpose sufficiently through his Word. His instruction can only be grasped through faith. Success is not the goal of the devout life; obedience is.

The account of the prophetic scroll in Jeremiah 36 illustrates the old English word "heedless." Neither people nor king were prepared to heed (i.e., hear and obey) the word of the Lord. Thus, at one level the account becomes a testimony to the consequences of heedlessness. But at another level, there were those who did heed the word of the Lord. They preserved the account for posterity, so that God's judging word from the past might be God's correcting and instructive word to future generations. It is the nature of God's Word that it always accomplishes its purpose. This question is valid for all of us today: Who recognizes the judging, correcting, and restorative nature of God's Word?

Jeremiah 37–45

Introduction to Jeremiah 37–45

CHAPTERS 37–45 FORM a subsection in the book of Jeremiah dealing primarily with the reign of Zedekiah and the fall of Jerusalem. Most of this material concerns the details of the Babylonian siege during the last two years of Zedekiah's reign (588–586 B.C.), his capture and ignominious transport to Babylon (39:4–7), and the tragic aftermath of the city's capture when Gedaliah, the Babylonian-appointed governor, is assassinated and Jeremiah is dragged to Egypt with a pitiful Judean contingent (chs. 40–44). A word of hope granted to Baruch concludes the section (ch. 45), dated to the fourth year of Jehoiakim (i.e., 605/604 B.C.). These narratives, therefore, did not form an original literary unity. They are a collection of accounts that have a thematic coherence to them.

Some scholars have called this narrative section a "passion narrative" because the suffering and oppression of the prophet are central to the accounts.² More important, however, is the fact that there are literary and thematic parallels in these chapters with the accounts of Jesus' suffering. This is the real reason to consider using the expression. "Passion narrative" is accurate enough as a description of Jeremiah's tragic setting, even if some may think that parallels to the passion accounts in the Gospels are overdrawn. The prophet is passionate enough about the fate of the people and tragically drawn into its consequences; nevertheless, it is unlikely that the expression would be used much without the New Testament connections.

It is important to stress that the suffering and oppression that Jeremiah experiences are not atoning or salvific for others. *Atonement* and *salvation* are wonderful terms to describe what Christ has accomplished for his people through his suffering. Those terms, however, do not describe what Jeremiah accomplishes (if that is even the right term to use) on behalf of God's people. Jeremiah's "passion narrative" describes the work of a prophet whose sensitivity toward a lost people results in a deep identification with them and their suffering, and also the work of a prophet whose innocent suffering is caught up in the fate of those same people. The Gospels describe a public ministry, and particularly narratives of a last tragic week in Jerusalem, that richly reflects the passion of our Lord, whose

suffering *is* on behalf of his people. Jeremiah's story is simply (and profoundly) a pointer in that direction.

We should also stress that these chapters are not the only accounts of Jeremiah's persecution, either in prose (e.g., 20:1–6) or poetry (e.g., 20:7–12), nor is the prophet the only figure of suffering in the accounts. Baruch, Gedaliah, and Ebed-Melech are caught up in the drama as well.

Fundamentally, Jeremiah's "passion narrative" continues the somber unfolding of self-incurred judgment on Judah and Jerusalem, a story deeply embedded in the minds of those who compiled Jeremiah's poetry. Tragic dissolution is the central theme to the accounts, although they are not without words of hope (e.g., the word to Baruch in ch. 45). A city is largely destroyed, a royal family is decimated by execution, a governor is treacherously murdered, and the prophet and his scribal companion are taken against their will to Egypt. As a story of suffering, there is plenty of illustrative material, and perhaps this is the point on which to start building a satisfactory interpretation.

The fate of the nation is a massive tragedy. The consequences of the Babylonian siege and destruction continue on in vicious cycles after the city has quit smoldering and the Babylonian army has departed. At several levels no one is exempt from the dark influence of the nation's fall. At another level, there are words of promise and protection to Ebed-Melech (39:15–18) and Baruch (45:1–5) that cast God's care in personal terms in spite of the upheaval. Others among the remnant are pointed to a better way (42:7–12), but they choose the wrong path.

These are chapters to ponder and to read together, even if their prehistory suggests diverse origins. If we seek "good news" from them, there will surely be some disappointment with their overwhelmingly negative tone. They take on a different hue, however, when placed in the larger context of Israel's history and the broader biblical witness, but we must be prepared to grapple theologically with the enormity of failure and with massive suffering. Only then will we sense the miracle of Jeremiah's preservation until his forced exile to Egypt; only then will we grasp some sense of the cost of discipleship carried by God's servants (Jeremiah, Gedaliah, Baruch, Ebed-Melech); only then will the gift of grace that comes undeserved be appreciated for what it is.

Jeremiah 37:1–21

¹ZEDEKIAH SON OF JOSIAH was made king of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; he reigned in place of Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim. ²Neither he nor his attendants nor the people of the land paid any attention to the words the LORD had spoken through Jeremiah the prophet.

³King Zedekiah, however, sent Jehucal son of Shelemiah with the priest Zephaniah son of Maaseiah to Jeremiah the prophet with this message: "Please pray to the LORD our God for us."

⁴Now Jeremiah was free to come and go among the people, for he had not yet been put in prison. ⁵Pharaoh's army had marched out of Egypt, and when the Babylonians who were besieging Jerusalem heard the report about them, they withdrew from Jerusalem.

⁶Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah the prophet: ⁷"This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: Tell the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of me, 'Pharaoh's army, which has marched out to support you, will go back to its own land, to Egypt. ⁸Then the Babylonians will return and attack this city; they will capture it and burn it down.'

⁹"This is what the LORD says: Do not deceive yourselves, thinking, 'The Babylonians will surely leave us.' They will not! ¹⁰Even if you were to defeat the entire Babylonian army that is attacking you and only wounded men were left in their tents, they would come out and burn this city down."

¹¹After the Babylonian army had withdrawn from Jerusalem because of Pharaoh's army, ¹²Jeremiah started to leave the city to go to the territory of Benjamin to get his share of the property among the people there. ¹³But when he reached the Benjamin

Gate, the captain of the guard, whose name was Irijah son of Shelemiah, the son of Hananiah, arrested him and said, "You are deserting to the Babylonians!"

¹⁴"That's not true!" Jeremiah said. "I am not deserting to the Babylonians." But Irijah would not listen to him; instead, he arrested Jeremiah and brought him to the officials. ¹⁵They were angry with Jeremiah and had him beaten and imprisoned in the house of Jonathan the secretary, which they had made into a prison.

¹⁶Jeremiah was put into a vaulted cell in a dungeon, where he remained a long time. ¹⁷Then King Zedekiah sent for him and had him brought to the palace, where he asked him privately, "Is there any word from the LORD?"

"Yes," Jeremiah replied, "you will be handed over to the king of Babylon."

¹⁸Then Jeremiah said to King Zedekiah, "What crime have I committed against you or your officials or this people, that you have put me in prison? ¹⁹Where are your prophets who prophesied to you, 'The king of Babylon will not attack you or this land'? ²⁰But now, my lord the king, please listen. Let me bring my petition before you: Do not send me back to the house of Jonathan the secretary, or I will die there."

²¹King Zedekiah then gave orders for Jeremiah to be placed in the courtyard of the guard and given bread from the street of the bakers each day until all the bread in the city was gone. So Jeremiah remained in the courtyard of the guard.

Original Meaning

CHAPTER 37 PROVIDES yet another account (like ch. 36) of royal failure and the continued rejection of the prophetic word. The royal culprit this time is Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, who is the pathetic leader of the doomed city.

37:1–2. According to verse 1, Zedekiah was placed on the throne in Judah by the Babylonians. They had surrounded Jerusalem in the winter months of 598/597 B.C. In March 597 the city surrendered to the Babylonians, and Jehoiachin, who had been king only a few months, was deported to Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar placed Jehoiachin's uncle Zedekiah on the throne. The deporting of Jehoiachin (sometimes called Coniah) and the appointing of Zedekiah as king were parts of a "divide and conquer" strategy on the part of the Babylonians. With two different men in two different communities claiming title to the Judean kingship, there was much occasion for internal tensions among the Judeans of Babylon and Palestine. The Babylonians hoped this would lessen the possibility of rebellion against their policies.

These two verses are actually a summary statement of Zedekiah's eleven years of reign. Details of his kingship and of his relationship with Jeremiah are picked up in verse 3 and continue through the end of chapter 38. The section 37:3–38:28 concern only the period of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem during the years 588–587/586.

37:3–10. An Egyptian army is moving toward Judah in a manner intended to threaten the Babylonian army. This is probably part of the Pharaoh Hophra's scheme to regain control of affairs in Judah in the spring or summer of 588.³ According to verse 4, Jeremiah was not confined or imprisoned during all of Zedekiah's reign, but the rest of chapter 37 confirms that he was confined in a variety of circumstances.

Verses 6–10 report on a revelation given Jeremiah by the Lord, a message that he is to transmit to Zedekiah: Babylon will succeed in taking the city. Even the language of verse 8 is paralleled almost exactly in 34:22. What is new in the revelation is the prediction that the Egyptian army will not turn the tide of the Babylonian intent to take Judah and Jerusalem.

37:11–15. The appearance of the Egyptian army causes a temporary lifting of the Babylonian siege. Possibly Jeremiah's futile attempt to leave Jerusalem at this time is the prelude to the visit of his cousin during his imprisonment (32:1–14). According to the summary statement in 37:12,

Jeremiah wants to go to the Benjamite tribal area in order to get his share of the property there. With the (temporary) lifting of the siege must have come a lot of frenetic activity among the inhabitants of the region. In Jeremiah's case, the guards of the city are suspicious that the prophet wants to leave the city in order to desert to the Babylonians. He is beaten and placed in confinement.

37:16–21. Zedekiah appears to be a classic case of a divided mind under pressure. On the one hand, he desperately seeks guidance for the difficulties of Judah, including his requests that Jeremiah pray to God (37:3) and that Jeremiah mediate God's will to him (37:17; see also ch. 21). On the other hand, the word of the Lord causes him consternation and demands of him what his self-serving and vacillating nature will not allow. Indeed, in his irrational behavior Zedekiah mistreats the very prophet he approaches for help.

Jeremiah is confined to a house belonging to a scribe (37:15) and later to a place associated with a guardhouse (37:21). Neither place appears to be a prison in the modern sense of the word, although Jeremiah's personal circumstances are painful. He is beaten at the scribe's house, and his rations in the guardhouse quarters are minimal. Later still, he will be thrown into a cistern (38:6). In 37:18 Jeremiah inquires of the king in what way he has sinned against the king or the people that he should be treated in this manner. He has consistently preached what God has given him to deliver, and he has responded whenever the king has inquired of him. The implied point is that he has told the truth and that Zedekiah is persecuting him for it.

Bridging Contexts

ZEDEKIAH AND A WORD FROM THE LORD. Zedekiah turns to the appropriate source in seeking answers to his dilemma: He seeks a word from the Lord. He fails, however, to listen to the word God communicates. Appropriately for the national crisis, he advocates prayer (37:3) and seeks a message from the Lord through Jeremiah (37:17). The problem is that God has previously informed Zedekiah that his actions and those of the people are unacceptable, and nothing seems to have changed—nothing from the side of God or that of Zedekiah. God has not changed his mind regarding the assessment of king and people, and Zedekiah seems oblivious to the

prophet's message. For his part, Zedekiah seems to have followed a form of the proverbial advice to "shoot the bearer of bad news."

Hindsight is usually better than foresight. The tragedy of this account is that God makes known the near future, and Zedekiah is simply incapable of hearing and responding.

Persecution and the prophets. Persecution comes to prophets. In a variety of ways the book of Jeremiah is one long testimony to the cost of prophetic activity. His imprisonment is one of several in the Bible for prophets; Joseph, Micaiah ben Imlah, John the Baptist, Peter, Paul, and John the seer of the Apocalypse are all companions in faith incarcerated for their role in delivering God's word. Some who represent the message of the Lord suffer the ultimate human judgment of death (e.g., Uriah the son of Shemaiah, 26:20–23). Indeed, as is made clear in Jesus Christ, were God himself to advocate his Word, the reaction does not necessarily differ.

Contemporary Significance

THE PRAYERS OF GOD'S PEOPLE. When is prayer for deliverance not acceptable? The question initially seems out of place since a loving God is typically open to the cries of his people, even if the timing of his response remains mysterious. Jesus taught his disciples to pray that they not be led into temptation but that God will deliver them from evil (Matt. 6:13). But there is a difference between Zedekiah and Moses, and between Jesus' disciples and the Judeans of Jeremiah's day. Disciples of Jesus cannot blatantly disregard his Word and then assume that a prayer for deliverance is efficacious; correspondingly, Zedekiah cannot assume that his rejection of God's Word will somehow induce God to send a different word of instruction.

There are circumstances where prayer is not what God desires. Although this sounds like a radical statement, it is worth some moments of reflection. Prayer is a staple of the Christian life, but it cannot be used as a reason for shirking one's responsibility or as an excuse for not being obedient to divine instruction.

A widely told anecdote concerns a man caught in his house during a period of heavy rains and flooding. As the water began to rise around his house, a neighbor came by to take him to higher ground and safety. The man refused to go, saying that he would wait out the storm and trust the Lord. As the water began to pour into the house, the man moved to the second story of the house. A police officer in a small boat came back and called to the man in the second-story window. The man replied similarly that he would wait out the storm and trust in the Lord. As the water continued to rise, the man climbed to his roof. A helicopter came by, and the man motioned for it to go on. After several frustrating minutes, the helicopter departed.

The man waited to see what would transpire next, and when the water continued to threaten, he began to pray to the Lord. He got an answer: "I sent a neighbor, a police officer, and a helicopter. Why didn't you listen?"

This seemingly trite story illustrates an important scriptural lesson. When God sends his servants to proclaim his message, and the servants and their message are rejected, then what other recourse is open? Unfortunately in many crises, no other avenue is open except that of failure and self-incurred destruction.

Stories of the recalcitrant and the disobedient (e.g., Zedekiah) in Scripture are not told so that a different generation can gleefully note how stupid "they" were. They are recorded so that any generation of God's people who read them can be instructed. After all, somebody among the faithful got it right and preserved the accounts for posterity. The foolish finally point by way of contrast to what is healthy among the people. It is far more instructive to read the accounts sympathetically, giving due attention to the possibility that in one way or the other we have become Zedekiah or Judah in our day.

It is important to remember how easy it is to assault the messenger rather than to listen carefully and to learn humbly from him or her. It is more convenient to reject an "unfriendly" assessment than it is to look in the mirror of God's Word.

Paradoxically, there is also hope in this disquieting account. Even in judging Zedekiah and the people, God is still at work to keep his promises. Zedekiah's family (i.e., that of David) will still be privileged to play a crucial role in God's economy. Moreover, what most Judeans think is an awful tragedy—the fall of the state and the resulting exile—is also the seedbed of new beginnings.

Jeremiah 38:1–28a

¹Shephatiah son of Mattan, Gedaliah son of Pashhur, Jehucal son of Shelemiah, and Pashhur son of Malkijah heard what Jeremiah was telling all the people when he said, ²"This is what the LORD says: 'Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague, but whoever goes over to the Babylonians will live. He will escape with his life; he will live.' ³And this is what the LORD says: 'This city will certainly be handed over to the army of the king of Babylon, who will capture it.'"

⁴Then the officials said to the king, "This man should be put to death. He is discouraging the soldiers who are left in this city, as well as all the people, by the things he is saying to them. This man is not seeking the good of these people but their ruin."

5"He is in your hands," King Zedekiah answered.
"The king can do nothing to oppose you."

⁶So they took Jeremiah and put him into the cistern of Malkijah, the king's son, which was in the courtyard of the guard. They lowered Jeremiah by ropes into the cistern; it had no water in it, only mud, and Jeremiah sank down into the mud.

⁷But Ebed-Melech, a Cushite, an official in the royal palace, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. While the king was sitting in the Benjamin Gate, ⁸Ebed-Melech went out of the palace and said to him, ⁹"My lord the king, these men have acted wickedly in all they have done to Jeremiah the prophet. They have thrown him into a cistern, where he will starve to death when there is no longer any bread in the city."

¹⁰Then the king commanded Ebed-Melech the Cushite, "Take thirty men from here with you and

lift Jeremiah the prophet out of the cistern before he dies."

¹¹So Ebed-Melech took the men with him and went to a room under the treasury in the palace. He took some old rags and worn-out clothes from there and let them down with ropes to Jeremiah in the cistern. ¹²Ebed-Melech the Cushite said to Jeremiah, "Put these old rags and worn-out clothes under your arms to pad the ropes." Jeremiah did so, ¹³and they pulled him up with the ropes and lifted him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the courtyard of the guard.

¹⁴Then King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah the prophet and had him brought to the third entrance to the temple of the LORD. "I am going to ask you something," the king said to Jeremiah. "Do not hide anything from me."

¹⁵Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, "If I give you an answer, will you not kill me? Even if I did give you counsel, you would not listen to me."

¹⁶But King Zedekiah swore this oath secretly to Jeremiah: "As surely as the LORD lives, who has given us breath, I will neither kill you nor hand you over to those who are seeking your life."

¹⁷Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, "This is what the LORD God Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'If you surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, your life will be spared and this city will not be burned down; you and your family will live. ¹⁸But if you will not surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, this city will be handed over to the Babylonians and they will burn it down; you yourself will not escape from their hands."

¹⁹King Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, "I am afraid of the Jews who have gone over to the Babylonians, for the Babylonians may hand me over to them and they will mistreat me."

²⁰"They will not hand you over," Jeremiah replied. "Obey the LORD by doing what I tell you. Then it will go well with you, and your life will be spared. ²¹But if you refuse to surrender, this is what the LORD has revealed to me: ²²All the women left in the palace of the king of Judah will be brought out to the officials of the king of Babylon. Those women will say to you:

"They misled you and overcame you those trusted friends of yours. Your feet are sunk in the mud; your friends have deserted you.'

²³"All your wives and children will be brought out to the Babylonians. You yourself will not escape from their hands but will be captured by the king of Babylon; and this city will be burned down."

²⁴Then Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, "Do not let anyone know about this conversation, or you may die. ²⁵If the officials hear that I talked with you, and they come to you and say, 'Tell us what you said to the king and what the king said to you; do not hide it from us or we will kill you,' ²⁶then tell them, 'I was pleading with the king not to send me back to Jonathan's house to die there.'"

²⁷All the officials did come to Jeremiah and question him, and he told them everything the king had ordered him to say. So they said no more to him, for no one had heard his conversation with the king.

²⁸And Jeremiah remained in the courtyard of the guard until the day Jerusalem was captured.

Original Meaning

CHAPTER 38 CONTINUES the narrative account begun in chapter 37 of Jeremiah's imprisonments during the final stages of the second Babylonian siege of Jerusalem. Jeremiah says nothing new about Judah's fate to Zedekiah (who wants desperately to have an authoritative but "positive" word on which to act). The choice that God has set before Zedekiah is described clearly, including words about the king's personal circumstances (38:17–23).⁴ The fear expressed by Zedekiah that he will be abused by fellow Judeans if he surrenders suggests that Zedekiah's concern about himself is stronger than that for his people.

38:1–6. The men named in verse 1 are "officials" (cf. v. 4). Two of them are named elsewhere in the book. Jehucal is the NIV rendering of Hebrew *Yukal*. The latter is a variant of the name Jehucal, a son of Shelemiah mentioned in 37:3; they are almost certainly the same person. Pashhur is one of Zedekiah's servants (21:1). These officials have much autonomy in dealing with Jeremiah, as Zedekiah concedes in verse 5.

The officials are angry with Jeremiah because his words about Babylonian supremacy are "discouraging" (v. 4; lit., "weaken the hands"). This is not a common phrase in the Old Testament, but it occurs in a secular letter from the time of Jeremiah, where it describes the effect of bad news. The officials lower Jeremiah into a cistern that has mud but no water. This is vindictive treatment by his opponents. Indirectly this comment tells the reader about the desperate circumstances of the siege. An empty cistern indicates water scarcity. Jeremiah is trapped in the cistern and unable to move easily or to rest.

38:7–13. One of the palace officials, a eunuch from Ethiopia, courageously approaches Zedekiah to overturn the order consigning Jeremiah to a slow and painful death. He secures an agreement from the king (who is holding court in the gate of Benjamin) and goes with thirty men to pull the weakened prophet from the muddy cistern. The need for thirty men is not for the task of pulling Jeremiah out of the cistern but for controlling any attempts to stop Ebed-Melech.

One gains an idea of how weak the prophet has become from the description of Ebed-Melech's manner of extricating him from the mire. The men provide some worn-out rags to place under Jeremiah's arms so that the rope harness will not injure him. Jeremiah is freed from his sentence of slow death, but he is still kept under confinement with Zedekiah's guards.

The actions of Ebed-Melech later receive a commendation of God and the promise of personal deliverance when the Babylonians finally take the city (see 39:15–18).⁷

38:14–28. The chapter concludes with the notice that Jeremiah remains in the court of the guard (cf. 37:20–21; 39:11–14) until the day that Jerusalem is captured. But Zedekiah is not through with the prophet. As in earlier cases (21:1; 37:3), the king seeks spiritual advice from him. Initially, Jeremiah seeks assurance that he will not be killed, and the king swears not to hand the prophet over to those who want to kill him.

Readers learn from the narrative that Zedekiah is as worried about his personal safety and future as he is about the city and the state. Jeremiah sets before the king the alternatives of surrendering and trusting the Lord for his safety or holding out and seeing the Babylonians victorious. The latter scenario includes the burning of the city (v. 23).

Zedekiah asks Jeremiah not to reveal their conversation. This is another indication of the king's divided mind and his vacillation with respect to listening to the prophet. One gains the impression from all this that both Jeremiah and Zedekiah are the subject of rumor and conspiracy and that Zedekiah has precious few people whom he can trust. The chapter concludes with the comment that Jeremiah remains in the courtyard of the guard until the Babylonians take the city. This last comment sets the stage for the narrative in chapter 39.

Bridging Contexts

FUNDAMENTAL CONVICTIONS. "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve" (Josh. 24:15). Much of the book of Jeremiah is about God's corporate judgment on Judah for her failures. Such a theological conviction is the presupposition of Jeremiah 38, yet this account also shines the light of inspired testimony on individual lives. Here the personal is at center stage. One sees how people variously react to fear and courage and how they view God's work in their circumstances.

The circumstances of the siege and the awful predicament in which the inhabitants of Jerusalem find themselves lead to personal crises. The time has come for people to act on their fundamental convictions, be they "orthodox" or not. Some officials hear Jeremiah's prophetic word as a

threat, undermining the resolve of the people necessary to their continued survival. The officials believe that the Lord should strengthen the people in time of need, not announce judgment to them through a prophet. As a result, they take action against the prophet.

Zedekiah hears the message repeatedly but is unable to face up to its demands. Pressure from various quarters has resulted in his doing little more than fretting over his personal safety.

Ebed-Melech too hears much of the debate, and he likewise acts on his fundamental convictions. In the midst of tragedy and suffering, hard choices, and even personal fear, Ebed-Melech stands with the prophet. As a result, God will stand with Ebed-Melech (39:15–18). Since action is a key indicator of a person's disposition, we should recognize in this man spiritual discernment as well as the courage of his convictions. Such discernment and moral courage are elements that can instruct Christians of any generation.

Readers may ask the question: Why would such an account as chapter 38 be preserved? Here are several answers. (1) It helps to explain the obdurate nature of Judah in refusing to see the hand of the Lord at work in judgment. (2) Moreover, it explains why Judah and Jerusalem fell. (3) But the account is also preserved in order to instruct readers and hearers in being open to God's corrective word and in trusting that dark days will lead to something better.

Contemporary Significance

FEAR. Fear does strange things to people. Some are almost superstitious in their avoidance of "negative talk." It is almost as if they believe that to silence the words means to avoid the reality to which they may point. The phenomenon is one reason for the proverbial saying that "one may kill the messenger but not the message." That is, if you throw Jeremiah into the cistern, his message will not be heard and hopefully will not come to pass. Better for Jesus to die than for the people to get stirred up. So-called "gag orders" are intended to keep someone from stating a truth publicly when it may prove to be injurious.

Some people are frozen by fear, unable to make a decision because they cannot clearly see a resolution. Not to decide on a course of action may be

prudent, just as staying a familiar course can be the better of options, but neither is satisfactory when God has called his people to accountability and to action. In the case of Zedekiah, not to act decisively and obediently to Jeremiah's prophetic word means simply keeping on with the old and tired policies of failure. In his case, not to decide is actually to make a fateful decision.

God's providence is so designed that people may inevitably face their fears and choose among difficult options. This is not necessarily "bad news." The issue is first discernment and then trusting God, who sends such matters our way. The Gospel narratives provide us with portraits of a Jesus who spoke his word in season and stood by his claims. It is true that he prayed for the cup of suffering and shame to be taken away (Luke 22:39–44). Yet what remained paramount for Jesus (and remains so for us) is the discerning of God's will. And once his will is discerned, trust in God is a conviction about life and our place in it.

Courage. Courage can be simply a noble human trait. But it can also be a gift of God in due season, and its manifestation in the lives of God's people are markers along the path of discipleship. It is for the combination of wisdom and courage that all Christians should pray, knowing that it is only a matter of time until they must make some difficult choices.

In December 1997, a disturbed fourteen-year-old boy in West Paducah, Kentucky, shot and killed four girls at the conclusion of a prayer meeting held before school hours. Hearing the shots and seeing the bodies fall, a boy at the scene stood his ground and finally convinced the attacker to drop his firearm. Why didn't he run from the killer, who still had a loaded weapon in his hand? A devout Christian, the boy stated simply that he felt that God wanted him to stand there and to reach out to the troubled attacker. Courage! It can be God's gift, and its exercise can become a testimony to the grace of the Giver.

In a story like this, one does not first ask about the lives of the four girls who were killed or the life of the disturbed teenager who shot them. All of this is relevant, of course, to understand something of the background to the tragic shootings, but none of that was useful in the quick moment when a decision had to be made. Like so many things in life, events can force decisions on us when we don't have the gift of time and leisurely reflection. If Christ's disciples have not spent time in the practice of discerning God's

will and in being open to the leading of God's Spirit, then the pressure of the moment will seem all the more constricting.

Jeremiah 38:28b-39:18

^{28b}This is how Jerusalem was taken: ^{39:1}In the ninth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon marched against Jerusalem with his whole army and laid siege to it. ²And on the ninth day of the fourth month of Zedekiah's eleventh year, the city wall was broken through. ³Then all the officials of the king of Babylon came and took seats in the Middle Gate: Nergal-Sharezer of Samgar, Nebo-Sarsekim a chief officer, Nergal-Sharezer a high official and all the other officials of the king of Babylon. ⁴When Zedekiah king of Judah and all the soldiers saw them, they fled; they left the city at night by way of the king's garden, through the gate between the two walls, and headed toward the Arabah.

⁵But the Babylonian army pursued them and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho. They captured him and took him to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon at Riblah in the land of Hamath, where he pronounced sentence on him. ⁶There at Riblah the king of Babylon slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes and also killed all the nobles of Judah. ⁷Then he put out Zedekiah's eyes and bound him with bronze shackles to take him to Babylon.

⁸The Babylonians set fire to the royal palace and the houses of the people and broke down the walls of Jerusalem. ⁹Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard carried into exile to Babylon the people who remained in the city, along with those who had gone over to him, and the rest of the people. ¹⁰But Nebuzaradan the commander of the guard left

behind in the land of Judah some of the poor people, who owned nothing; and at that time he gave them vineyards and fields.

¹¹Now Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had given these orders about Jeremiah through Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard: ¹²"Take him and look after him; don't harm him but do for him whatever he asks." ¹³So Nebuzaradan the commander of the guard, Nebushazban a chief officer, Nergal-Sharezer a high official and all the other officers of the king of Babylon ¹⁴sent and had Jeremiah taken out of the courtyard of the guard. They turned him over to Gedaliah son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, to take him back to his home. So he remained among his own people.

¹⁵While Jeremiah had been confined in the courtyard of the guard, the word of the LORD came to him: ¹⁶"Go and tell Ebed-Melech the Cushite, 'This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: I am about to fulfill my words against this city through disaster, not prosperity. At that time they will be fulfilled before your eyes. ¹⁷But I will rescue you on that day, declares the LORD; you will not be handed over to those you fear. ¹⁸I will save you; you will not fall by the sword but will escape with your life, because you trust in me, declares the LORD.'"

Original Meaning

THIS CHAPTER HAS PARALLELS with the accounts in Jeremiah 52:1–16 and 2 Kings 25:1–12. As noted in the introduction, the year of the fall of Jerusalem is disputed. The eleventh year of Zedekiah (Jer. 39:2) was either 587 or 586 B.C., probably the latter. The city wall was breached in the fourth month, which would be July/August (according to a spring new year). The temple was not burned until a month later (52:6–14).8

38:28b–39:7. The first line of this section introduces the account of Jerusalem's fall, but the narrative quickly shifts to a description of Zedekiah's fate. To put it succinctly, his fate is essentially the same as that of the city and people (39:4–7). He attempts to escape the consequences of Jerusalem's fall by fleeing to the Jordan Valley. He is caught by the Babylonian army with gruesome results. First he is taken to Riblah in Syria, where Nebuchadnezzar is in residence. The Babylonian king personally gives Zedekiah his sentence. His sons (and potential heirs) are slain in his presence along with other Judean nobles. The Judean king is then blinded so that the last thing he sees is the death of family and friends. He is then bound in fetters like other Judean exiles and taken to Babylon. Nothing else is preserved about him.

39:8–10. These verses describe succinctly the actual burning of the city. Named in particular are the royal palace and houses of the people. The walls are also pulled down. Nothing is mentioned about the temple here.

Nebuzaradan, a high Babylonian official, organizes much of the surviving population into a group for exile. Some of the poorest people in Judah (probably those who do not own land) are left to tend the land. Thus the former state of Judah is not totally depopulated, and the Babylonians will be able to extract tribute from those who remain to tend the land.

- **39:11–14.** Nebuchadnezzar himself orders that Jeremiah be released from confinement. Reasons for his release are not cited, but Jeremiah's confinement serves no Babylonian purpose, and perhaps Nebuchadnezzar has heard secondhand that a Judean prophet proclaimed his supremacy. Moreover, the Babylonians⁹ turn him over to Gedaliah son of Ahikam, son of Shaphan. In the next chapter we learn that Nebuchadnezzar will appoint Gedaliah as governor of Judah. Here we see again the illustrious family of Shaphan, whose members had been supportive of Jeremiah. Gedaliah's fate also mirrors the Judean tragedy, even though his personal commitments are closer to those of Jeremiah than Zedekiah's.
- 39:15–18. The narrator provides a retrospective account of an oracle Jeremiah received about Ebed-Melech, the eunuch who saved his life during the darker moments of the siege. God has granted Ebed-Melech his life. Even though he is an official of the despised Zedekiah, he will not be handed over to the Babylonians.

Bridging Contexts

WHEN READ IN THE CONTEXT of the book as a whole, Jeremiah 39 seems not only tragic but also somewhat anticlimactic. The fall of Jerusalem predicted by Jeremiah does, in fact, come to pass, and the faithless Zedekiah is treated harshly by the Babylonians. All we read are the bare details of the account, something like the brief report of the fall of Samaria in 2 Kings 17:1–6.¹³

Bilevel reading. One function of this chapter is the somber confirmation that Jeremiah's prophetic word has reached fulfillment concerning the city and the king. Zedekiah pays the price for his moral and spiritual weakness. He had worried about reprisals from his countrymen if he surrendered to the Babylonians (Jer. 38:19) only to find that he was unable to avoid the prophetic word that he would have to account for his failures. According to the prophet, Zedekiah could have avoided an awful fate and saved the city from destruction (38:17–18), but it was not to be.

One can see this account working on at least two levels. On the one hand, hindsight demonstrates that Zedekiah chose the path that ultimately failed him. He was a responsible agent who acted irresponsibly. On the other hand, his path also confirmed the prophetic word that announced judgment on such a path. Act and consequence are tragically bound together. Both of these elements can be instructive to later readers who seek to learn from the past.

This bilevel reading also works for the report of Jeremiah's word to Ebed-Melech. The eunuch chose his difficult path and discovered that God was with him. He was an agent who acted responsibly on his spiritual and moral convictions. He received his life rather than exile or execution, like many associated with the royal house (cf. Matt. 16:24–26). One cannot universalize from these two examples, but they are instructive nevertheless to God's people.

Contemporary Significance

TRAGEDY AND JUDGMENT. Is there such a thing as an *expected* tragedy? So often what makes an event or circumstance "tragic" is its unexpectedness. Certainly readers of the Old Testament can point to the account of Jerusalem's fall and say that the city's fate was announced beforehand. A

tragedy that is anticipated and yet comes to pass is, in some sense, doubly tragic, because if it is anticipated, there should be ways of mitigating its harshness.

In Judah's case, we may question why one would even call such an event a tragedy rather than simply a reflection of God's judgment. It is really both, and therein lies something for us to think about. Tragedy suggests that an event or process does not have to turn out that way. In theological terms it suggests that God may have preferred it otherwise (cf. Ezek. 18:32), that he took no pleasure in the fall—indeed, that he sent a string of prophets to try and turn Judah from its self-destructive folly. Whether tragedy or judgment, the circumstances of Judah's fall were both allowed and then used by God in the history of his people.

Yet there can be a personal word from God that comes in the midst of tragedy or judgment. One sees it in the gift of life to Ebed-Melech. Such a word just comes. Is it expected? Hardly so, if one calls such a thing a word of grace. Grace happens, but it cannot be presumed upon. God is the God of new beginnings as well as the God of historical destiny. How judgment and new life work out in God's economy is what gives shape to the Christian life and confirms God as Lord of all circumstances.

End and beginning. On December 7, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt gave his famous "a day that will live in infamy" speech. It was his reaction to the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, an event that occasioned the official entrance of the United States into World War II. What tragedies and judgments resulted from that event! The attack on Pearl Harbor took place early on a Sunday morning. But is it only a past act, or was it really the ending of an old form of existence and the beginning of something new, something that is still working out its effects decades after the fact? It is both!¹⁴

The fall of Jerusalem is analogous. It brought several things to an end. Yet it was the beginning of something new, something that would continue on for decades. One might even argue that its effects are still being worked out in the history of Judaism and events occurring in the Middle East. Christians should see the outlines of a pattern here: God at work to use circumstances, even tragedy, for different and life-giving purposes.

¹THE WORD CAME to Jeremiah from the LORD after Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard had released him at Ramah. He had found Jeremiah bound in chains among all the captives from Jerusalem and Judah who were being carried into exile to Babylon. ²When the commander of the guard found Jeremiah, he said to him, "The LORD your God decreed this disaster for this place. ³And now the LORD has brought it about; he has done just as he said he would. All this happened because you people sinned against the LORD and did not obev him. ⁴But today I am freeing you from the chains on your wrists. Come with me to Babylon, if you like, and I will look after you; but if you do not want to, then don't come. Look, the whole country lies before you; go wherever you please." ⁵However, before Jeremiah turned to go, Nebuzaradan added, "Go back to Gedaliah son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, whom the king of Babylon has appointed over the towns of Judah, and live with him among the people, or go anywhere else you please."

Then the commander gave him provisions and a present and let him go. ⁶So Jeremiah went to Gedaliah son of Ahikam at Mizpah and stayed with him among the people who were left behind in the land.

⁷When all the army officers and their men who were still in the open country heard that the king of Babylon had appointed Gedaliah son of Ahikam as governor over the land and had put him in charge of the men, women and children who were the poorest in the land and who had not been carried into exile to Babylon, ⁸they came to Gedaliah at Mizpah—Ishmael son of Nethaniah, Johanan and Jonathan the sons of Kareah, Seraiah son of Tanhumeth, the sons of Ephai the Netophathite, and Jaazaniah the

son of the Maacathite, and their men. ⁹Gedaliah son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, took an oath to reassure them and their men. "Do not be afraid to serve the Babylonians," he said. "Settle down in the land and serve the king of Babylon, and it will go well with you. ¹⁰I myself will stay at Mizpah to represent you before the Babylonians who come to us, but you are to harvest the wine, summer fruit and oil, and put them in your storage jars, and live in the towns you have taken over."

¹¹When all the Jews in Moab, Ammon, Edom and all the other countries heard that the king of Babylon had left a remnant in Judah and had appointed Gedaliah son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, as governor over them, ¹²they all came back to the land of Judah, to Gedaliah at Mizpah, from all the countries where they had been scattered. And they harvested an abundance of wine and summer fruit.

¹³Johanan son of Kareah and all the army officers still in the open country came to Gedaliah at Mizpah ¹⁴and said to him, "Don't you know that Baalis king of the Ammonites has sent Ishmael son of Nethaniah to take your life?" But Gedaliah son of Ahikam did not believe them.

¹⁵Then Johanan son of Kareah said privately to Gedaliah in Mizpah, "Let me go and kill Ishmael son of Nethaniah, and no one will know it. Why should he take your life and cause all the Jews who are gathered around you to be scattered and the remnant of Judah to perish?"

¹⁶But Gedaliah son of Ahikam said to Johanan son of Kareah, "Don't do such a thing! What you are saying about Ishmael is not true."

41:1In the seventh month Ishmael son of Nethaniah, the son of Elishama, who was of royal

blood and had been one of the king's officers, came with ten men to Gedaliah son of Ahikam at Mizpah. While they were eating together there, ²Ishmael son of Nethaniah and the ten men who were with him got up and struck down Gedaliah son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, with the sword, killing the one whom the king of Babylon had appointed as governor over the land. ³Ishmael also killed all the Jews who were with Gedaliah at Mizpah, as well as the Babylonian soldiers who were there.

⁴The day after Gedaliah's assassination, before anyone knew about it, ⁵eighty men who had shaved off their beards, torn their clothes and cut themselves came from Shechem, Shiloh and Samaria, bringing grain offerings and incense with them to the house of the LORD. 6Ishmael son of Nethaniah went out from Mizpah to meet them, weeping as he went. When he met them, he said, "Come to Gedaliah son of Ahikam." ⁷When they went into the city, Ishmael son of Nethaniah and the men who were with him slaughtered them and threw them into a cistern. ⁸But ten of them said to Ishmael, "Don't kill us! We have wheat and barley, oil and honey, hidden in a field." So he let them alone and did not kill them with the others. ⁹Now the cistern where he threw all the bodies of the men he had killed along with Gedaliah was the one King Asa had made as part of his defense against Baasha king of Israel, Ishmael son of Nethaniah filled it with the dead.

¹⁰Ishmael made captives of all the rest of the people who were in Mizpah—the king's daughters along with all the others who were left there, over whom Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard had appointed Gedaliah son of Ahikam.

Ishmael son of Nethaniah took them captive and set out to cross over to the Ammonites.

¹¹When Johanan son of Kareah and all the army officers who were with him heard about all the crimes Ishmael son of Nethaniah had committed, ¹²they took all their men and went to fight Ishmael son of Nethaniah. They caught up with him near the great pool in Gibeon. ¹³When all the people Ishmael had with him saw Johanan son of Kareah and the army officers who were with him, they were glad. ¹⁴All the people Ishmael had taken captive at Mizpah turned and went over to Johanan son of Kareah. ¹⁵But Ishmael son of Nethaniah and eight of his men escaped from Johanan and fled to the Ammonites.

¹⁶Then Johanan son of Kareah and all the army officers who were with him led away all the survivors from Mizpah whom he had recovered from Ishmael son of Nethaniah after he had assassinated Gedaliah son of Ahikam: the soldiers, women, children and court officials he had brought from Gibeon. ¹⁷And they went on, stopping at Geruth Kimham near Bethlehem on their way to Egypt ¹⁸to escape the Babylonians. They were afraid of them because Ishmael son of Nethaniah had killed Gedaliah son of Ahikam, whom the king of Babylon had appointed as governor over the land.

Original Meaning

THE TRAGEDY ASSOCIATED with Judah's demise continues after the destruction of the city. Jeremiah 40–41 revolve around the ill-fated Gedaliah son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, who is appointed governor of the province by the Babylonians (40:5, 7) and who will die at the hands of a Judean zealot named Ishmael (41:1–3). Gedaliah is already mentioned in 39:14 as the one to whom Jeremiah is released from custody. He was from

an influential family and one friendly to Jeremiah. His grandfather, Shaphan, had been a member of Josiah's cabinet, and his father, also related to Josiah's administration, had been of crucial support to Jeremiah after a disastrous temple sermon (26:24; cf. 2 Kings 22).

Thus, the Babylonians appoint someone known to those remaining in the land and someone with administrative and political experience. It is possible, indeed likely, that Gedaliah agreed with Jeremiah's claim that God had employed Babylon as chastisement on Judah, and so he was prepared to do what seemed best for Judah in the months after Jerusalem's fall. He advises those around him to "not be afraid to serve the Babylonians," for in so doing it may go well with them (Jer. 40:9; cf. the prophet's words to the exiles in Babylon, 29:4–7).

40:1–6. Nebuzaradan, a Babylonian official, addresses Jeremiah (39:9), stating that God has given Judah and Jerusalem into the hands of Babylon in order to judge them. This may sound strange to modern readers, but many people in antiquity affirmed the power of a local deity in its sphere of influence. There is no reason to suspect sarcasm or insincerity on the part of Nebuzaradan.¹⁶

Jeremiah is also given a choice whether to go to Babylon or remain in the land with Gedaliah. From the point of view of personal security, it would likely be better for Jeremiah to accompany Nebuzaradan to Babylon, but he chooses to remain with the remnant in the land. In this choice the prophet signals a commitment to the land and to renewal, just like his symbolic purchase of property during the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem (32:1–15). So Jeremiah becomes a member of the remnant band associated with Gedaliah. He seems to know nothing about the plot against the governor. That Jeremiah is given provisions and a "present" by the Babylonians (40:5) is recognition on their part that the prophet predicted their success.

40:7–16. Remnants of Judeans begin to gather around Gedaliah at Mizpah, about five miles north of Jerusalem.¹⁷ Included in the group are Ishmael son of Nethaniah and Johanan son of Kareah, two people whose actions will affect decisively the fortunes of both the little province and the prophet Jeremiah. Johanan is a member of the Judean army but also seemingly well-connected to the remaining officials in Judah. Ishmael is related to the royal family of Judah (41:1). Johanan discovers (we know not how) that Baalis, king of the Ammonites (40:14), has concocted a plot with

Ishmael to assassinate Gedaliah.¹⁸ Indeed, Johanan apprises Gedaliah of his knowledge, but Gedaliah does not believe the report.

Verses 10–11 remind us of the continuing impact of the Babylonian siege. When the Babylonian army first marched into the area, a number of Judeans had fled their homes to take up residence in surrounding territories. Now that the Babylonians have completed their siege and the main elements of the army returned to Babylon, many of these Judeans now return to see what remains of their former property. Upon doing so, they also find that additional property needs tending. Gedaliah's comment to them—"Live in the towns you have taken over"—indicates that the control of land has now passed to them and to others who remain.

All in all, it is a precarious time for those who remain in the land. They can be called the "remnant of Judah" (40:15), and the tasks of bringing corporate life back to a more even keel are daunting. Gedaliah may well have been able to represent the interests of the remnant to the Babylonian provincial administration. Unfortunately, this will never be known because of his tragic and untimely demise.

- 41:1–3. Chapter 41 narrates quickly Ishmael's treacherous murder of Gedaliah. Treachery is the correct description of murder during a mealtime, since the "eating together" of Ishmael and Gedaliah presupposes social bonding and hospitality. The massacre is both a strike against the Babylonians and an attempt by Ishmael to usurp power. In addition to Gedaliah (the appointed governor) Ishmael murders "all the Jews" with Gedaliah and the Babylonian soldiers present. By "all the Jews" is probably meant the Judean men who work with Gedaliah in administrative affairs. Verses 10 and 16 report the survival of some persons from the town of Mizpah.
- 41:4–18. The day after the murder at Mizpah, a group of pilgrims from Shiloh, Shechem, and Samaria come south on the hill-country road to Jerusalem. They have cut their beards and torn their clothes as signs of ritual humiliation, and they intend to worship at the site of the temple in Jerusalem (41:4–8). Here is unintended commentary on the importance of the temple for people who lived outside the territory of Judah. The pilgrims from the north want to present grain offerings and incense at the temple in Jerusalem; does this mean that part of the temple cult continues even after the destruction of the temple itself? Perhaps an altar has been erected and

repositioned in the courtyard, or perhaps the ceremony envisioned by the pilgrims is for prayer and lamentation, and their gifts symbolic gesture. The text does not say, and interpreters should be wary of speculation.

In yet another treacherous act, Ishmael gains their confidence and brings them to Mizpah, only to murder most of them and then to cast their bodies into the large cistern built by a former king. A few are spared, who offer him provisions they have hidden in a field. Ishmael then gathers the townspeople and sets out to cross over the Jordan River to the Ammonites. Among his captives are daughters of the king. Most likely these are daughters of Zedekiah from marriages with women of prominent local families. Johanan and his soldiers attempt to intercept Ishmael. The two groups met near Gibeon, with the result that most of the captives taken by Ishmael are recovered by Johanan and his officers, but Ishmael and eight of his men escape.

The question faced by Johanan and his band is, "What now?" Their fear of Babylonian reprisal and the treachery of men like Ishmael lead them toward a decision to flee the region. Their choice of venue is Egypt, where already a sizable group of Judeans live.

Bridging Contexts

Human tendency to self-destruction. Why would an exilic audience find this sad account instructive? The material is not provided only to explain to exiles (or later generations) what happened in the past, but also to demonstrate the tragic consequences of Judah's folly as they continue to play themselves out after the fall of Jerusalem. In a related way the account confirms that the prophet of God does not have a saving word for every occasion. Although it is clear that Jeremiah did not support the assassination of Gedaliah, he says nothing about the plot beforehand (he may have known nothing about it). He will also be ineffective in seeking to convince Johanan and company to stay in the land (ch. 42). The prophet is thus caught up in the circumstances of the tragedy, and he will bear some of its consequences.

In some ways these two chapters are the saddest in the whole book of Jeremiah. Babylon has clearly demonstrated its mastery over Judah, confirming a word Jeremiah proclaimed for years; yet Gedaliah, the one

figure who may have facilitated reconstruction of life in the land and become a symbol of hope, is senselessly killed. God will, of course, be able to overcome these bitter ashes of defeat, but it comes at considerable cost.

The account of life in the land after the fall of the city is a clear illustration of human community gone bad, with no mechanism to help it right itself. Part of the impact of reading these chapters is simply to sigh and be reminded of the human tendency toward self-destruction. Only the larger context of God's superabounding grace, based on his resolve to stay with such a people, provides any hope beyond the tragedy.

Contemporary Significance

REBUILDING AFTER DEFEAT. "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). For North American readers, the depressing account of Gedaliah's murder and the continuing downward spiral in Judah may strike a responsive chord in their historical memory. Abraham Lincoln announced that a "house divided against itself cannot stand." He knew he was quoting a biblical text (cf. Mark 3:24–25), and he believed that God would judge the United States for its folly in the slave trade and its continuing bitter conflict over ways to resolve the matter.

After four years of civil war (1861–1865), with the southern states in tatters and the whole nation exhausted from the senseless bloodletting, Lincoln began to look for ways to rebuild the nation and to reconcile its various factions. He went public with his conviction that God had judged the affairs of the nation, and he refused to take the moral high ground of exemption when it came to confessing the judging hand of God. Lincoln was not perfect (nor was Gedaliah!), but he represented the possibility of moving past the consequences of moral and spiritual failure. A twisted soul named John Wilkes Booth assassinated Lincoln before he could put his plans for reconciliation into effect, and the resulting turmoil in the southern states over harsh reconstruction policies was extremely costly.¹⁹

What does one say to such a "lesson"? One should begin by affirming that the painful historical process came about as self-incurred failure. Its effects linger on. The issues are not just "in the past." Christians, however, should go on further and, like Lincoln, confess the hand of God at work in judgment.

Are there not additional things that we as Christians can confess? One of them is that Lincoln (like Gedaliah and Jeremiah) is something of a tragic figure. In a mysterious way, he bore corporate failure in his person and suffered along with the nation—and not just in his death. The Christological analogy is not complete: Lincoln (Gedaliah or Jeremiah) did not atone for the sins of others, but they did suffer as part of their "calling."

Their tragedy raises interesting questions. If God uses their tragic circumstances to instruct his people and to evoke measures of repentance and sympathy, then they serve a larger purpose. Moreover, failure can be the prelude to and even the beginning of new directions. In the midst of a national humiliation Gedaliah advises his contemporaries not to fear. Jeremiah chooses the more difficult road rather than setting off to Babylon. Do those who have tasted new life in the crucified and risen Lord have eyes to see and ears to hear what the Spirit is saying?

Jeremiah 42:1-43:7

¹THEN ALL THE ARMY OFFICERS, including Johanan son of Kareah and Jezaniah son of Hoshaiah, and all the people from the least to the greatest approached ²Jeremiah the prophet and said to him, "Please hear our petition and pray to the LORD your God for this entire remnant. For as you now see, though we were once many, now only a few are left. ³Pray that the LORD your God will tell us where we should go and what we should do."

4"I have heard you," replied Jeremiah the prophet. "I will certainly pray to the LORD your God as you have requested; I will tell you everything the LORD says and will keep nothing back from you."

⁵Then they said to Jeremiah, "May the LORD be a true and faithful witness against us if we do not act in accordance with everything the LORD your God sends you to tell us. ⁶Whether it is favorable or unfavorable, we will obey the LORD our God, to

whom we are sending you, so that it will go well with us, for we will obey the LORD our God."

⁷Ten days later the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah. ⁸So he called together Johanan son of Kareah and all the army officers who were with him and all the people from the least to the greatest.

⁹He said to them, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, to whom you sent me to present your petition, says:

¹⁰'If you stay in this land, I will build you up and not tear you down; I will plant you and not uproot you, for I am grieved over the disaster I have inflicted on you. ¹¹Do not be afraid of the king of Babylon, whom you now fear. Do not be afraid of him, declares the LORD, for I am with you and will save you and deliver you from his hands. ¹²I will show you compassion so that he will have compassion on you and restore you to your land.'

13"However, if you say, 'We will not stay in this land,' and so disobey the LORD your God, ¹⁴ and if you say, 'No, we will go and live in Egypt, where we will not see war or hear the trumpet or be hungry for bread,' 15then hear the word of the LORD, O remnant of Judah. This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'If you are determined to go to Egypt and you do go to settle there, ¹⁶then the sword you fear will overtake you there, and the famine you dread will follow you into Egypt, and there you will die. ¹⁷Indeed, all who are determined to go to Egypt to settle there will die by the sword, famine and plague; not one of them will survive or escape the disaster I will bring on them.' 18This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'As my anger and wrath have been poured out on those who lived in Jerusalem, so will my wrath be poured out on you when you go to Egypt. You will be an object of cursing and horror, of condemnation and reproach; you will never see this place again.'

¹⁹"O remnant of Judah, the LORD has told you, 'Do not go to Egypt.' Be sure of this: I warn you today ²⁰that you made a fatal mistake when you sent me to the LORD your God and said, 'Pray to the LORD our God for us; tell us everything he says and we will do it.' ²¹I have told you today, but you still have not obeyed the LORD your God in all he sent me to tell you. ²²So now, be sure of this: You will die by the sword, famine and plague in the place where you want to go to settle."

^{43:1}When Jeremiah finished telling the people all the words of the LORD their God—everything the LORD had sent him to tell them—²Azariah son of Hoshaiah and Johanan son of Kareah and all the arrogant men said to Jeremiah, "You are lying! The LORD our God has not sent you to say, 'You must not go to Egypt to settle there.' ³But Baruch son of Neriah is inciting you against us to hand us over to the Babylonians, so they may kill us or carry us into exile to Babylon."

⁴So Johanan son of Kareah and all the army officers and all the people disobeyed the LORD's command to stay in the land of Judah. ⁵Instead, Johanan son of Kareah and all the army officers led away all the remnant of Judah who had come back to live in the land of Judah from all the nations where they had been scattered. ⁶They also led away all the men, women and children and the king's daughters whom Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard had left with Gedaliah son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, and Jeremiah the prophet and Baruch son of Neriah. ⁷So they entered Egypt in disobedience to the LORD and went as far as Tahpanhes.

Original Meaning

THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER ended with the note that Johanan and company were worried about Babylonian reprisals for the death of Gedaliah and thus considered an escape to Egypt (41:17–18). The current section (42:1–43:7) narrates a discussion between Jeremiah and the group, which takes place over a ten-day period and eventuates in the flight to Egypt. Jeremiah offers both a prophetic oracle and his personal word against such a flight.

One of the mysteries of the narrative is the location of Jeremiah and Baruch at the time of the massacres at Mizpah. According to the last reference to Jeremiah in the narrative, he left the presence of Nebuzaradan in Jerusalem and went to Gedaliah at Mizpah (40:1–6). Most likely, Jeremiah placed himself under the administrative authority of Gedaliah. But before the treacherous murders perpetrated by Ishmael at Mizpah, he and Baruch have probably settled elsewhere. In any case, the meeting of Johanan and Jeremiah apparently takes place after the arrival of Johanan and company at Geruth Kimham near Bethlehem.²⁰ Through this account, we are given some context for the surprising fact that Jeremiah and Baruch eventually go to Egypt.

- 42:1–6. Should the remnant associated with Johanan (and until recently with Gedaliah) flee to Egypt or not? They seek the counsel of God through Jeremiah and promise obedience to the prophetic word. There is an implied self-curse in 42:5, should the company of Judeans not heed the Lord's instruction. Jeremiah agrees to seek counsel from the Lord and to tell them everything the Lord reveals.
- 42:7–22. Jeremiah's reply to the request of Johanan takes two forms. After ten days he begins with the preface, "This is what the LORD ... says," where the gist of the message is that God will preserve the remnant of Judeans if they stay in the land. In language associated with Jeremiah's call, God promises to build and to plant them in the land and there to protect them from the wrath of Nebuchadnezzar (42:10–12). Should they choose to disregard his word and to flee to Egypt, judgment will come on them there.

This indication of judgment should be read in light of 42:5, where the people ask that God be a "true and faithful witness" against them if they disobey his revealed word. Jeremiah adds his personal word to the group

(42:19–22), indicating that a choice for Egypt means that they are self-deceived and will not escape judgment.

43:1–7. Members of the group accuse Jeremiah of lying to them and of engaging in a conspiracy with Baruch, who wants the group to stay in the land. Why Baruch might be an agent of subterfuge is not clear from their accusation. Their reaction to Jeremiah's prophetic oracle is similar to that of Zedekiah. The latter specifically asked Jeremiah for a word from the Lord, but when he didn't like what Jeremiah provided, he simply refused to obey.

The end result is that Johanan leads the group to Tahpanhes in Egypt. Jeremiah and Baruch are taken with them, but not willingly. Tahpanhes (cf. 2:16) is located in the eastern section of the Nile Delta. It is one of the first communities that a traveler from Palestine would encounter when approaching the Nile Delta from the east. As 44:1 makes clear, it was one of several cities in Egypt with a Judean population.

Bridging Contexts

THIS EXCHANGE BETWEEN the group and the prophet is one of the clearest examples in Jeremiah of an overt disobedience to God's revealed will. The conversation makes the issues relatively clear, if not ominous. The group wants to escape reprisal from the Babylonians. Jeremiah counsels them to be more attentive to what God has to say about their circumstances. Thus a primary reason to preserve the account is to explain the failure of and the judgment on the nation that continues among disobedient survivors of the Babylonian campaigns.

It is worth noting here that a decision to flee to Egypt likely seems the safer of the two choices, at least in appearance. Nebuchadnezzar would not take kindly to the assassination of his hand-picked governor, and there is every reason to expect reprisals in some form. Furthermore, Egypt is not (yet!) under the control of the Babylonians, so if Johanan and the group make it safely there, they may have some expectation of continued security from the Babylonians.

Both the group solicitation of Jeremiah and his prophetic reply to them are couched in the language of path and obedience. There is similarity in language and theme with the great sermons of Deuteronomy as well as with elements within Jeremiah's own previous utterances. Readers are invited,

therefore, not just to take note of the "why" of the continuing tragedy but to see in the language of path and obedience a calling to make their own. Jeremiah is not unconcerned about prevailing circumstances. Rather, he places concern for the safety of the group in the larger context of listening to the guidance of the Lord and having the courage to follow it.

Contemporary Significance

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' ..." (Matt. 7:21–23; cf. Luke 6:46). It is difficult to talk about obedience in modern North America, whether in secular terms or as part of the life of discipleship. Our dominant culture is one of freedom of choice and avoiding lasting commitments; it also places a premium on "happiness" (whatever that might mean). In spite of these cultural traits, modern Christians should not understand obedience to God's revealed will as an irrelevant burden or needless constriction; obedience is the proper response needed to fulfill one's calling. In biblical terms obedience is virtually a synonym for the path of discipleship.

It is certainly easy to complain that we don't always know God's will and to offer that as a reason why we don't do something. One should not make light of the intellectual difficulties associated with discerning God's will, but it is more frequently the case that the hindrance to discipleship comes from moral sloth and failure to trust than from inability to discern at least the basics of a course of action.

A former teacher once said that truth is only known through commitment. What he meant is that the intellectual approach to God or the dialogical form of inquiry can be helpful, but personal commitment to God (and being known by God) is where the truth of God's sovereignty and goodness is revealed. What a tragedy that Jeremiah's companions could commit themselves in advance to following God's will, only to reject it when it did not suit their predilections.

Jeremiah 43:8-44:30

⁸In Tahpanhes the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: ⁹"While the Jews are watching, take some large stones with you and bury them in clay in the brick pavement at the entrance to Pharaoh's palace

in Tahpanhes. ¹⁰Then say to them, 'This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: I will send for my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and I will set his throne over these stones I have buried here; he will spread his royal canopy above them. ¹¹He will come and attack Egypt, bringing death to those destined for death, captivity to those destined for captivity, and the sword to those destined for the sword. ¹²He will set fire to the temples of the gods of Egypt; he will burn their temples and take their gods captive. As a shepherd wraps his garment around him, so will he wrap Egypt around himself and depart from there unscathed. ¹³There in the temple of the sun in Egypt he will demolish the sacred pillars and will burn down the temples of the gods of Egypt.""

44:1 This word came to Jeremiah concerning all the Jews living in Lower Egypt—in Migdol, Tahpanhes and Memphis—and in Upper Egypt: ²"This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: You saw the great disaster I brought on Jerusalem and on all the towns of Judah. Today they lie deserted and in ruins ³because of the evil they have done. They provoked me to anger by burning incense and by worshiping other gods that neither they nor you nor your fathers ever knew. ⁴Again and again I sent my servants the prophets, who said, 'Do not do this detestable thing that I hate!' 5But they did not listen or pay attention; they did not turn from their wickedness or stop burning incense to other gods. ⁶Therefore, my fierce anger was poured out; it raged against the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem and made them the desolate ruins they are today.

⁷"Now this is what the LORD God Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Why bring such great disaster

on yourselves by cutting off from Judah the men and women, the children and infants, and so leave yourselves without a remnant? ⁸Why provoke me to anger with what your hands have made, burning incense to other gods in Egypt, where you have come to live? You will destroy yourselves and make yourselves an object of cursing and reproach among all the nations on earth. ⁹Have you forgotten the wickedness committed by your fathers and by the kings and queens of Judah and the wickedness committed by you and your wives in the land of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem? ¹⁰To this day they have not humbled themselves or shown reverence, nor have they followed my law and the decrees I set before you and your fathers.

11"Therefore, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: I am determined to bring disaster on you and to destroy all Judah. ¹²I will take away the remnant of Judah who were determined to go to Egypt to settle there. They will all perish in Egypt; they will fall by the sword or die from famine. From the least to the greatest, they will die by sword or famine. They will become an object of cursing and horror, of condemnation and reproach. ¹³I will punish those who live in Egypt with the sword, famine and plague, as I punished Jerusalem. ¹⁴None of the remnant of Judah who have gone to live in Egypt will escape or survive to return to the land of Judah, to which they long to return and live; none will return except a few fugitives."

¹⁵Then all the men who knew that their wives were burning incense to other gods, along with all the women who were present—a large assembly—and all the people living in Lower and Upper Egypt, said to Jeremiah, ¹⁶"We will not listen to the

message you have spoken to us in the name of the LORD! ¹⁷We will certainly do everything we said we would: We will burn incense to the Queen of Heaven and will pour out drink offerings to her just as we and our fathers, our kings and our officials did in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. At that time we had plenty of food and were well off and suffered no harm. ¹⁸But ever since we stopped burning incense to the Queen of Heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have had nothing and have been perishing by sword and famine."

¹⁹The women added, "When we burned incense to the Queen of Heaven and poured out drink offerings to her, did not our husbands know that we were making cakes like her image and pouring out drink offerings to her?"

²⁰Then Jeremiah said to all the people, both men and women, who were answering him, ²¹"Did not the LORD remember and think about the incense burned in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem by you and your fathers, your kings and your officials and the people of the land? ²²When the LORD could no longer endure your wicked actions and the detestable things you did, your land became an object of cursing and a desolate waste without inhabitants, as it is today. ²³Because you have burned incense and have sinned against the LORD and have not obeyed him or followed his law or his decrees or his stipulations, this disaster has come upon you, as you now see."

²⁴Then Jeremiah said to all the people, including the women, "Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah in Egypt. ²⁵This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: You and your wives have shown by your actions what you

promised when you said, 'We will certainly carry out the vows we made to burn incense and pour out drink offerings to the Queen of Heaven.'

"Go ahead then, do what you promised! Keep your vows! ²⁶But hear the word of the LORD, all Jews living in Egypt: 'I swear by my great name,' says the LORD, 'that no one from Judah living anywhere in Egypt will ever again invoke my name or swear, "As surely as the Sovereign LORD lives." ²⁷For I am watching over them for harm, not for good; the Jews in Egypt will perish by sword and famine until they are all destroyed. ²⁸Those who escape the sword and return to the land of Judah from Egypt will be very few. Then the whole remnant of Judah who came to live in Egypt will know whose word will stand—mine or theirs.

²⁹"This will be the sign to you that I will punish you in this place,' declares the LORD, 'so that you will know that my threats of harm against you will surely stand.' ³⁰This is what the LORD says: 'I am going to hand Pharaoh Hophra king of Egypt over to his enemies who seek his life, just as I handed Zedekiah king of Judah over to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the enemy who was seeking his life.'"

Original Meaning

THIS SECTION NARRATES the work of Jeremiah (and Baruch) in Egypt. They are taken by their Judean compatriots to Tahpanhes in the eastern Nile Delta. Although implicit, Jeremiah and Baruch have been forced to accompany the group. In Egypt Jeremiah performs a symbolic act in preparation for judgment to come and informs the Judeans there of his activities (43:8–13). Chapter 44 records Jeremiah's second judgmental prophecy against Judeans in Egypt (44:1–14), a reply on the part of his

Judean audience (44:15–19), and then a third judgment speech of the prophet (44:20–30).

43:8–13. At God's initiative, Jeremiah takes some large stones and buries them in the courtyard of a government building in Tahpanhes. He explains this act by saying that God will grant his "servant Nebuchadnezzar" a seat over these stones when the Babylonian king spreads out his royal canopy. Jeremiah's prophetic depiction of Nebuchadnezzar's presence is an indication that Babylon will conquer Egypt. Moreover, judgment will come on those Judeans who think they have escaped the reach of the Babylonians by fleeing to Egypt. The prophet also predicts that the Babylonians will set fire to temples in the land of Egypt and break the obelisks (standing stones) in the city of the sun, that is, Heliopolis, located just northeast of modern Cairo.

Readers may wonder what the local Egyptians thought about a Judean prophet burying stones in a public courtyard. The narrative, however, does not tell us. As the instructions to the prophet make clear, he is to take the stones and bury them while fellow Jews are watching. The symbolic act and accompanying oracle are intended as instruction for Jews, not Egyptians.

44:1–14. The bitter exchange between prophet and people in chapter 44 underscores the deep cultural and religious fissures in the Judean community. These verses are Jeremiah's prophetic invective against Judean people in Egypt.²² They concentrate on Judean idolatry and syncretism, if not outright apostasy against their ancestral faith. Included is the (by now) familiar charge that God had sent prophets to warn them, yet their words of warning were rejected.

Verse 7 contains a rhetorical question: "Why bring such great disaster on yourselves?" The point is another one familiar to readers of the book: Acts have consequences; the idolatry and apostasy of Judeans in Egypt will have the same self-incurred consequences as did idolatry and apostasy in Judah. The prophet concludes with a statement that Judeans in Egypt seem not to have associated the fall of Judah and Jerusalem as judgment on their faithlessness to the Lord. As the following reply to the prophet makes clear, some have not made the connection.

44:15–19. The people's testy reply to the prophet's judgment speech—that they will indeed continue to worship the Queen of Heaven²³—reflects two significant assumptions about religious practice on the part of Judeans.

(1) Religion has the primary function of securing the health and safety of a group. (2) The worship of the Queen of Heaven was stopped earlier in Judah (by Josiah?) and subsequently resumed. The fortunes of the people, so they claim, have turned out better with her than with the Lord. "At that time we had plenty of food and were well off and suffered no harm" (v. 17). As a result, the Judeans in Egypt intend to maintain the worship of the Queen of Heaven as did their ancestors and their kings in Judah.

In particular, the Judean women reply that their worship of the Queen of Heaven was done with the acquiescence of their husbands (44:19). The crowd assembled with Jeremiah contains representatives from different communities in Egypt, women as well as men. Although Jeremiah's previous comments have not singled out either Judean women or worship of the Queen of Heaven, their role in her cult takes center stage as the example of idolatry²⁴ and apostasy. Perhaps the occasion for the prophet's challenge to the Judeans comes at a time of public ceremony or festival, when people gather for public ritual.

44:20–30. Jeremiah's reply to the people's resolve to commit apostasy is that judgment will come on them for their act of faithlessness toward the Lord. He judges implicitly their claim that things are better with the Queen of Heaven than with the Lord.

Jeremiah recognizes that his give-and-take with the crowd has set out both their resolve to remain worshipers of the Queen of Heaven and God's resolve that his word of judgment will come to pass. He predicts, therefore, that Pharaoh Hophra, the current ruler of Egypt, will be given over to the hands of his enemies as a sign of God's mastery of affairs, even in Egypt. In 569 B.C. Hophra was killed by one of his officials in a military coup.

The prophet does identify a future for a Jewish remnant, a future in which the remnant will recognize whose word stands the test of time. Jeremiah predicts that it will be the word of the Lord that stands the test of time, not that of the Queen of Heaven and her worshipers.

Bridging Contexts

BLINDNESS CONTINUES. The Judeans in Egypt exhibit a pattern of behavior similar to that of Judah and Jerusalem before the Babylonian siege and destruction; that is, they ignore the words of the prophet, God's servant. The

consequences for them will be similar to those in Judah, thereby illustrating one of the larger themes of chapters 37–45. Unfortunately, spiritual blindness and political shortsightedness have not ceased among Judeans with the hammer blows of the Babylonians, and so the consequences of this blindness will be severe.

There is little in this section of the book about judgment that has not been said elsewhere in Jeremiah. It is as if the prophet is destined to face recalcitrance and intransigence among his Judean contemporaries all the days of his prophetic work. Readers should not despair over these somber reports, however. Some indeed take Jeremiah's words to heart, preserve them, and prepare for the future on the basis of their authority.

It is illuminating to compare Jeremiah's words to the Egyptian Judeans in chapter 44 with his word to Baruch in chapter 45. The prophet declares that there is no safe haven for Judean iniquity, even in Egypt and (temporarily) away from the reach of the Babylonians. For Baruch, by contrast, the promise is that wherever he goes, God is with him for protection.

In neither case should we read these prophecies and draw blanket conclusions for any situation—Babylon will not be the end of Judean existence in Egypt, nor does chapter 45 guarantee Baruch a blissful existence—but both judgment and promise tell us something fundamental about God. The Lord was (and remains) committed to the judgment of failure among his people as well as to the vindication of his servants. How these truths work themselves out in a given scenario will vary, but God's commitments do not.

Religion that works. Judean presumptions about the efficacy of religious activities dedicated to the Queen of Heaven have their counterparts among modern people. (1) There are people for whom influencing the divine world (however defined) is the paramount reason to engage in religious activities. Religion is "whatever works," rather than the worship and service of the one true God who spoke to Jeremiah and who was fully revealed in Christ. A similar form of religion is the "health and wealth" teaching that makes faith a work to guarantee personal health and material gain.

(2) Some modern interest has developed in goddess worship and spirituality as a way to supplement the worship of a so-called "patriarchal" God of the Bible. God, of course, may have "maternal" instincts (to use anthropopathic language) along with his "paternal" role, but the God of the

Bible does not have a sexual identity. The newer interest among progressive Western religions for the feminine divine or goddess spirituality may be driven, in part, by a developing feminist consciousness. Even so, modern seeking for and worship of a goddess is essentially an update of the misplaced concerns of the Judean worshipers of the Queen of Heaven.

Contemporary Significance

EXERCISING DESPERATE MANEUVERS. The somber words of Jeremiah are eloquent reminders of what life can be like when one is estranged from God and has little clue to the power of inherited corruption. Especially hard to deal with are those people who insist they know something about God; for them, being sent into exile (or whatever difficulty) cannot be his work. It would be nice (so human reflection might go) if we could discover the key to saving ourselves consistent with what we think we know about God. Perhaps (so human reflection might continue) the key to self-saving comes in recognizing a new religious impulse whereby the divine world is invoked for protection; perhaps the key lies in the advance of science to meet God; or perhaps the key lies in the flight from problems in the hope that they will not reach us where we have gone. All of these things are overtly a seeking of life, but the end result will be death.

Desperate people will do desperate things. On July 24, 1998, Russell Weston attempted to enter the United States Capitol building without going through the required metal detector. When met by a uniformed officer, he pulled out a pistol and shot the officer, inflicting a mortal wound. A brief gunfight ensued within the hallways of the Capitol in which a second officer was killed trying to stop Weston from advancing any farther. Both Weston and a tourist were wounded in the exchange, with Weston felled by multiple gunshot wounds from officers who returned his fire. Perhaps time and investigation will reveal the degrees to which Weston's senseless attack was precipitated by mental sickness, paranoia, and anger. Apparently he wanted to make his point and fix what he thought was wrong about the government. Everyone acknowledges that his actions were disastrously wrong, even if he himself was too ill to grasp right from wrong.

Weston's sad case illustrates how often desperate maneuvers lead only to failure. Is he not ultimately a sad and twisted illustration of the human

propensity to go to any length to make a "point" and to "fix it" ourselves? Sadly for him (and for all of us), the only avenue of "fixing things" comes by accepting God's diagnosis of failure and his free gift of life.

In a related fashion, the modern movements toward worship of one or more goddesses may be motivated by true spiritual hunger. There is no reason to doubt that the Judeans' worship of the Queen of Heaven resulted from pressing spiritual needs. They simply looked in the wrong direction to meet those needs. In a similar manner the modern counterparts will be judged. The hunger is real, but so is the spiritual blindness that keeps people from seeing their true home with the Lord.

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7). The pathway to life begins by acknowledging that every road leads to death except the one charted by God. Jeremiah's contemporaries in Egypt simply could not face the fact that they had been (and remained) part of a failed political and religious enterprise. Tragically, they were willing to do almost anything to hear from God: kidnap Jeremiah and Baruch, worship the Queen of Heaven, and so on. What they refused to do is to acknowledge their failure and depend on the God of grace, who can make all things new.

Jeremiah 45:1-4

¹This is what Jeremiah the prophet told Baruch son of Neriah in the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, after Baruch had written on a scroll the words Jeremiah was then dictating: ²"This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says to you, Baruch: ³You said, 'Woe to me! The LORD has added sorrow to my pain; I am worn out with groaning and find no rest.""

⁴The LORD said, "Say this to him: 'This is what the LORD says: I will overthrow what I have built and uproot what I have planted, throughout the land. ⁵Should you then seek great things for yourself? Seek them not. For I will bring disaster on all people, declares the LORD, but wherever you go I will let you escape with your life.'"

Original Meaning

THE PROPHECY CONCERNING Baruch is out of place chronologically with the preceding chapters (Jeremiah 37–44). Verse 1 provides a date in the fourth year of Jehoiakim (605 B.C.), which coincides with the command from the Lord in 36:1 for Jeremiah to prepare a scroll of his prophecies. The fallout over Baruch's reading from the scroll may have been an early occasion for public persecution of this scribe, who was Jeremiah's secretary and companion. According to 36:19, 26, Baruch was forced into hiding because of his reading of the scroll at the temple complex. After the fall of Jerusalem, the Judeans accused him of playing loose with the truth (43:3). Subsequently he and Jeremiah were taken to Egypt by a band of Judeans.

Why does this account come at the end of the description of the Egyptian sojourn of Jeremiah and Baruch? Some commentators suggest that the chronological citation in 45:1 is an error (inadvertent or otherwise) and that the assurance to Baruch that God will spare his life originated as a timely assurance during the tense period in Egypt. This solution is possible, but not satisfactory. Although the prophecy does follow the narratives about life in Egypt, there are no compelling text-critical reasons to remove or to overlook the chronological citation in 45:1. Readers should take seriously the setting of the oracle during the reign of Jehoiakim.

Other commentators agree that the account is an earlier statement, but they suggest it is repeated "literarily" in this context to inform readers that God does take care of his own. This is a more satisfactory reading. These words to and about Baruch owe their literary placement to their thematic and theological value as a divine confirmation that Baruch served God and would be enabled to perform his calling. Moreover, the placement of this prophecy as a conclusion to the narratives about life in Egypt serves to reinforce the claim that Baruch's presence in Egypt is not the result of God's disfavor. Thus, although neither prophet nor companion will escape the fate of the nation, God will vindicate them nevertheless.

Baruch's "woe" (45:3) is a counterpart to the laments of Jeremiah. There is a cost to serving the Lord in times such as these—as Uriah (26:20–23) and Jeremiah discovered. The divine oracle to Baruch repeats the language of uprooting and tearing down used at Jeremiah's commission to the prophetic office (1:10). In the tragic affairs of Judah and Jerusalem, God has been at work to uproot and tear down. Baruch has no more "right" (to

use modern Western language) than anyone else to expect that he will escape the consequences of corporate and historical judgment that have swept through the region.

In that light, all that can be said is that God calls Baruch to be faithful and that his personal safety resides with God. God promises him that his life has been granted to him "wherever" he might go. Readers are given no additional information about where his service to Jeremiah and to God may take him. His life is a gift, and he has been called to use it well.

Bridging Contexts

INCARNATIONAL MINISTRY. The last word from Egypt in chapter 45 is actually a reminder of an earlier word of assurance. That word remained valid for Baruch wherever he went. Christian discipleship often requires people to identify with the circumstances in which God has placed them. If they do not commit themselves to the circumstances at hand, then it is possible that their looking ahead (usually a good thing) will keep them from exercising a discriminating witness in the present.

Not only is this a characteristic of discipleship; it is a form of incarnational ministry—to be there in person. Disciples are called to be salt and light wherever they are. Baruch's call as scribe and companion to Jeremiah put him in more than one precarious situation. There is nothing wrong with his cry of "woe," for such woeful circumstances were the common lot of the day as the tumult of Judean persecution and Babylonian conquest spread their tentacles. "Woe," while understandable, cannot be the last word of discipleship. God will have the last word in the evaluation of one's work and of one's fate. The last word (literarily) from Egypt, where Baruch and Jeremiah have gone and from whom we will not hear again, is a reminder of an earlier word of assurance. Just as God was watching over his word to fulfill it (1:12), so God is watching over Baruch. Like Ebed-Melech, Baruch has received his life as a gift, so that in return he may serve the Lord in difficult circumstances.

In the Bible Egypt is a strange place for God's people. Consider Abraham, Joseph, the Hebrew slaves, and Moses. Jeremiah offers judgment on Egypt (cf. Jer. 46:2–26) and the Judeans there. But his word should also be compared with that of Isaiah, who sees Egypt as a future blessing for the

world (Isa. 19:23–25). In the New Testament the family of Jesus flees to Egypt as political refugees (Matt. 2:19–23). Egypt is not home to God's people, but a lot of formation for ministry is accomplished there, and God's resolve to bless comes from there.

Contemporary Significance

SERVING IN EXILE. According to Coptic Church² tradition, Jeremiah and Baruch chose a spot to come and pray while in Egypt. It was the same place that Moses had used centuries earlier for the same purpose. Later, the holy family would utilize that same spot when they fled to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod (cf. Matt. 2:13–15). This legendary tradition reveals a larger truth: God is a source of strength and encouragement to those serving "in exile."

Christians who feel isolated or depressed over their circumstances, who have been forced into unfamiliar territory, or who are caught up in destructive forces that overwhelm their lives are invited to measure their lives against a scriptural pattern including saints such as Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Jeremiah, and Baruch. Abraham made mistakes in Egypt. Joseph was unjustly imprisoned there. Moses committed murder there and struggled against Pharaoh and his minions to mobilize his people to leave. Jeremiah and Baruch were kidnapped and brought to Egypt.

None of these saints, however, lacked the attention of God, who remained faithful to them in times of upheaval. This did not cause their pain to go away. Their lives were gifts in service to the Lord in and through the difficulties. And through their difficulties God formed disciples. No wonder that the idiom for Baruch is that his life is a prize of war. It is certainly given to him in the midst of struggle.

In Baruch's case, he assisted in the formation of a book that now instructs us all. That is his greatest gift.

Jeremiah 46–51

Introduction to Jeremiah 46–51

LIKE OTHER PROPHETIC BOOKS, Jeremiah contains a series of prophecies (or oracles) about other nations. And as with these other books, Jeremiah's oracles are largely collected into one section (Jer. 46–51; cf. 25:19–26). The location of the collected oracles, however, is one of the biggest differences between the Hebrew and Greek versions of the book. In the Greek versions, the oracles against the nations come after 25:13.2 Moreover, the order of the oracles differs somewhat between the versions. The Hebrew manuscripts begin with oracles against Egypt, while the Greek begins with the oracle against Elam.

English versions of the Bible generally follow the chapter arrangements of the Hebrew Bible (the Masoretic Text). This is not necessarily the earliest order of the oracles or placement in a Jeremiah book. Scholars cannot say with certainty what was the original order or placement in the larger collection. Indeed, that question is not nearly as important as that of the collection's contents. Possibly the prophet's oracles against the nations circulated in more than one order from an early time in their literary history.³ In fact, most likely some of the oracles were given individually and only later assembled into a literary collection.

Scholars are divided over which institutions in ancient Israel fostered the public utterance of such prophecies and thereby helped shape their form and concerns. The two most prominent suggestions are cultic festivals, when communities gathered for worship, or councils assembled for war.⁴ Both settings were locations where presentations about God's judgment or curses against evildoers would be made. Prophets and priests are naturally associated with cultic festivals as well as with the public decisions about going to war (cf. 1 Kings 22). In the case of Jeremiah 46–51, the oracles preserve almost nothing about their institutional setting(s). They sit like an appendix at the end of the book, preserving only a few clues as to their origin in the prophet's ministry.

A handful of chronological indicators are preserved in the oracles. For example, 46:2 provides a date that prompted a prophecy against Egypt (605 B.C.), and 49:34 refers to a prophecy early in Zedekiah's reign (597 B.C.).

Thus, what has been said about the book of Jeremiah as a whole also applies to the collection of the oracles about the nations: The prophecies were gathered over a period of time and were placed together because of their common focus on other peoples. They preserve much of their oral flavor but little of the life-settings in Jeremiah's ministry. As a published collection, they bear the marks of editing, such as brief introductory formulae and (apparently) some elaboration/updating in the final text.⁵

The purpose of the collection of oracles in Jeremiah 46–51 appears to be to preserve for posterity the prophet's words about God's judgment in the historical process. Martial language is replete throughout the oracles,⁶ which depict God's wrath as operating through the warfare between neighboring states. Individually and as a collection, these oracles demonstrate the designation of Jeremiah as "a prophet to the nations" (1:5). They presuppose that God is the Lord of history and the moral Judge (and potential Deliverer) of all peoples.

These prophecies are not to be read as blueprints for international events to come in the late seventh/early sixth centuries B.C. any more than they are to be read as blueprints for the twenty-first century A.D. They do indicate elements of historical relations during Jeremiah's day, but more fundamentally they indicate God's resolve to judge idolatry, hubris, and cruelty through the historical process and his intention to use that same process to reveal his glory. In this regard the oracles about the nations function like the prophecies to Israel, Judah, and Jerusalem. They mediate judgment (actualized or to come) and, in some cases, indicate the possibilities of restoration and renewal.

Jeremiah's prophecies about other nations have within them some words addressed to or about God's people (e.g., 46:27–28; 50:4–5, 17–20; 51:5–10). Also, at the end of chapter 51 comes a prose account of instructions that Jeremiah gave to Seraiah, Baruch's brother, when Seraiah went to Babylon on a diplomatic mission (51:59–64). Seraiah was to take a scroll with written prophecies about Babylon, tie a stone to the scroll, and then throw it in the Euphrates River as a sign that Babylon would sink like the weighted scroll.

Not only should the oracles about the nations in Jeremiah be read in conjunction with oracles about Judah and Jerusalem, but also the fate of the nations themselves cannot finally be separated from what God has in store for his covenant people. Judgment and deliverance alike belong to God. Indeed, judgment on the nations is mere preparation for the announcement of good news that will be spread among them by early Christians (see below).

The prophecies about the nations come in the following sequence:

About Egypt	46:2–26
A word to God's people	46:27–28
About the Philistines	47:1–7
About Moab	48:1–47
About Ammon	49:1–6
About Edom	49:7–22
About Damascus	49:23–27
About Kedar (Arabs)	49:28–33
About Elam	49:34–39
About Babylon	50:1-51:64

A recent phenomenon from the Middle East may help modern readers understand the role of the oracles against neighbor states in Jeremiah 46–51. In 1990 hostilities broke out in the region when Iraq threatened and then invaded Kuwait. Eventually several Western nations were drawn into the fray in what became known as the Gulf War. The struggle between Kuwait and Iraq was carried out in more ways than through fighting or diplomatic wrangling. Both states also carried on a propaganda war by several means, including the hiring of bedouin poets who adapted classical Arabic verse on the radio to sting the opposition. The oracles or poems announced divine judgment on the enemy, and their authors used sarcasm and parody in order to belittle the opposition. The poets' efforts became popular radio programs,

and both Kuwaiti and Iraqi poets competed for acclaim as the best in concocting such oracles. "Going public" with such oracles stated a case against the opponent and set them up for the predicted fall to come.

Jeremiah's oracles against neighbor states also adapted classical forms of Hebrew poetry used for oracles against nations since at least the time of Amos. These oracles too announce divine judgment and use sarcasm to reveal the hubris and cruelty of the opponents. They are witnesses against injustice as well as advocates of justice to be meted out by God.

One of the striking things about these oracles in Jeremiah (and in the other prophetic books) is that they are primarily concerned with God's just judgment to come. They offer a vantage point of universal judgment on Gentiles (= nations) for such matters as their oppression of God's people or of their more general inhumanity in conduct. It is instructive to put this emphasis beside that of the New Testament when the latter addresses the fate of the nations. The New Testament documents have two major foci in this regard. (1) The nations will be judged by God and by the risen Christ. One sees this most clearly in Jesus' teaching, both in apocalyptic discourses (e.g., Matt. 24; Mark 13; Luke 21) and elsewhere (e.g., Matt. 25; Luke 10:1–15). The New Testament letters also reflect this conviction (e.g., 2 Peter 3:1–13; Rev. 19:11–21).

(2) The gospel of redemption through the death and resurrection of Christ is to be preached among the nations because Jew and Gentile alike are called to repent and to receive new life in Christ (e.g., Acts 3:17–26; Rom. 15:7–22; Rev. 5:9–10). In speaking about the gospel among the nations, the New Testament sometimes refers to the Old Testament promise that through Abraham's seed "all peoples on earth will be blessed" (Gen. 12:3) or that Israel is to be "a light for the Gentiles" (Isa. 49:6).8

By way of summary, the oracles against the nations in the Old Testament prophets are part of a larger biblical concern. They set up standards of judgment and express concern for justice and the need for repentance. The broader biblical concern for the salvation of the nations is predicated on their need for repentance and the gift of God's transforming grace.

Jeremiah 46:1-49:39

¹This is the word of the LORD that came to Jeremiah the prophet concerning the nations:

²Concerning Egypt:

This is the message against the army of Pharaoh Neco king of Egypt, which was defeated at Carchemish on the Euphrates River by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon in the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah:

³"Prepare your shields, both large and small, and march out for battle! ⁴Harness the horses. mount the steeds! Take your positions with helmets on! Polish your spears, put on your armor! ⁵What do I see? They are terrified, they are retreating, their warriors are defeated. They flee in haste without looking back, and there is terror on every side," declares the LORD. 6"The swift cannot flee nor the strong escape. In the north by the River Euphrates they stumble and fall. ⁷"Who is this that rises like the Nile, like rivers of surging waters? ⁸Egypt rises like the Nile,

⁹Charge, O horses! Drive furiously, O charioteers!

like rivers of surging waters.

She says, 'I will rise and cover the earth; I will destroy cities and their people.' March on, O warriors—
men of Cush and Put who carry
shields,

men of Lydia who draw the bow.

¹⁰But that day belongs to the Lord, the LORD Almighty—

a day of vengeance, for vengeance on his foes.

The sword will devour till it is satisfied, till it has quenched its thirst with blood.

For the Lord, the LORD Almighty, will offer sacrifice in the land of the north by the Piver

in the land of the north by the River Euphrates.

11"Go up to Gilead and get balm, O Virgin Daughter of Egypt.

But you multiply remedies in vain; there is no healing for you.

¹²The nations will hear of your shame; your cries will fill the earth.

One warrior will stumble over another; both will fall down together."

¹³This is the message the LORD spoke to Jeremiah the prophet about the coming of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon to attack Egypt:

14"Announce this in Egypt, and proclaim it in Migdol;

proclaim it also in Memphis and Tahpanhes:

'Take your positions and get ready, for the sword devours those around you.'

¹⁵Why will your warriors be laid low?

They cannot stand, for the LORD will push them down.

¹⁶They will stumble repeatedly; they will fall over each other.

They will say, 'Get up, let us go back to our own people and our native lands,

away from the sword of the oppressor.'

17There they will exclaim,
'Pharaoh king of Egypt is only a loud noise;
he has missed his opportunity.'

18"As surely as I live," declares the King, whose name is the LORD Almighty,
"one will come who is like Tabor among the mountains, like Carmel by the sea.
19 Pack your belongings for exile, you who live in Egypt,
for Memphis will be laid waste

and lie in ruins without inhabitant.

20"Egypt is a beautiful heifer,
but a gadfly is coming
against her from the north.
21The mercenaries in her ranks

are like fattened calves.

They too will turn and flee together, they will not stand their ground,

for the day of disaster is coming upon them,

the time for them to be punished.

²²Egypt will hiss like a fleeing serpent as the enemy advances in force; they will come against her with axes,

like men who cut down trees.

²³They will chop down her forest," declares the LORD,

"dense though it be.

They are more numerous than locusts, they cannot be counted.

²⁴The Daughter of Egypt will be put to shame,

handed over to the people of the north."

²⁵The LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "I am about to bring punishment on Amon god of Thebes, on Pharaoh, on Egypt and her gods and her kings, and on those who rely on Pharaoh. ²⁶I will hand them over to those who seek their lives, to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and his officers. Later, however, Egypt will be inhabited as in times past," declares the LORD.

²⁷"Do not fear, O Jacob my servant;
do not be dismayed, O Israel.
I will surely save you out of a distant place,
your descendants from the land of
their exile.

Jacob will again have peace and security, and no one will make him afraid.

²⁸Do not fear, O Jacob my servant, for I am with you," declares the LORD.

"Though I completely destroy all the nations among which I scatter you, I will not completely destroy you. I will discipline you but only with justice; I will not let you go entirely unpunished."

^{47:1}This is the word of the LORD that came to Jeremiah the prophet concerning the Philistines before Pharaoh attacked Gaza:

²This is what the LORD says:

"See how the waters are rising in the north;

they will become an overflowing torrent.

They will overflow the land and everything in it,

the towns and those who live in them.

The people will cry out;

all who dwell in the land will wail

³at the sound of the hoofs of galloping steeds,

at the noise of enemy chariots and the rumble of their wheels.

Fathers will not turn to help their children; their hands will hang limp.

⁴For the day has come to destroy all the Philistines and to cut off all survivors

who could help Tyre and Sidon.
The LORD is about to destroy the

The LORD is about to destroy the Philistines,

the remnant from the coasts of Caphtor.

⁵Gaza will shave her head in mourning; Ashkelon will be silenced.

O remnant on the plain, how long will you cut yourselves?

6...'Ah, sword of the LORD,' you cry, 'how long till you rest?

Return to your scabbard; cease and be still.'

⁷But how can it rest when the LORD has commanded it, when he has ordered it to attack Ashkelon and the coast?"

^{48:1}Concerning Moab:

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says:

"Woe to Nebo, for it will be ruined.

Kiriathaim will be disgraced and
captured;
the stronghold will be disgraced and
shattered.

²Moab will be praised no more; in Heshbon men will plot her downfall:

'Come, let us put an end to that nation.'

You too, O Madmen, will be silenced; the sword will pursue you.

³Listen to the cries from Horonaim, cries of great havoc and destruction.

⁴Moab will be broken; her little ones will cry out.

⁵They go up the way to Luhith, weeping bitterly as they go; on the road down to Horonaim anguished cries over the destruction are heard.

⁶Flee! Run for your lives; become like a bush in the desert.

⁷Since you trust in your deeds and riches, you too will be taken captive, and Chemosh will go into exile, together with his priests and officials.

8The destroyer will come against every town,
and not a town will escape.
The valley will be ruined and the plateau destroyed,
because the LORD has spoken.
9Dut selt on Mooh

⁹Put salt on Moab, for she will be laid waste; her towns will become desolate, with no one to live in them.

¹⁰"A curse on him who is lax in doing the LORD's work!

A curse on him who keeps his sword from bloodshed!

11"Moab has been at rest from youth, like wine left on its dregs, not poured from one jar to another—she has not gone into exile.

So she tastes as she did, and her aroma is unchanged.

¹²But days are coming," declares the LORD,

"when I will send men who pour from jars, and they will pour her out;

they will empty her jars and smash her jugs.

¹³Then Moab will be ashamed of Chemosh, as the house of Israel was ashamed when they trusted in Bethel.

14"How can you say, 'We are warriors, men valiant in battle'?

¹⁵Moab will be destroyed and her towns invaded;

her finest young men will go down in the slaughter," declares the King, whose name is the LORD Almighty.

16"The fall of Moab is at hand; her calamity will come quickly.

¹⁷Mourn for her, all who live around her, all who know her fame;

say, 'How broken is the mighty scepter, how broken the glorious staff!'

18"Come down from your glory and sit on the parched ground, O inhabitants of the Daughter of Dibon,

for he who destroys Moab will come up against you and ruin your fortified cities.

¹⁹Stand by the road and watch, you who live in Aroer.

Ask the man fleeing and the woman escaping,

ask them, 'What has happened?'

²⁰Moab is disgraced, for she is shattered. Wail and cry out!

Announce by the Arnon that Moab is destroyed.

²¹Judgment has come to the plateau to Holon, Jahzah and Mephaath,

²²to Dibon, Nebo and Beth Diblathaim,

²³to Kiriathaim, Beth Gamul and Beth Meon,

²⁴to Kerioth and Bozrah to all the towns of Moab, far and near.

²⁵Moab's horn is cut off; her arm is broken."

declares the LORD.

²⁶"Make her drunk,

for she has defied the LORD.

Let Moab wallow in her vomit;
let her be an object of ridicule.

27Was not Israel the object of you

²⁷Was not Israel the object of your ridicule?

Was she caught among thieves, that you shake your head in scorn whenever you speak of her?

²⁸Abandon your towns and dwell among the rocks, you who live in Moab.

Be like a dove that makes its nest at the mouth of a cave.

29"We have heard of Moab's pride—her overweening pride and conceit, her pride and arrogance and the haughtiness of her heart.
30I know her insolence but it is futile,"

declares the LORD,

"and her boasts accomplish nothing.

Therefore I wail over Moab,for all Moab I cry out,I moan for the men of Kir Hareseth.

32I weep for you, as Jazer weeps, O vines of Sibmah.

Your branches spread as far as the sea; they reached as far as the sea of Jazer.

The destroyer has fallen on your ripened fruit and grapes.

³³Joy and gladness are gone from the orchards and fields of Moab.

I have stopped the flow of wine from the presses;

no one treads them with shouts of joy.

Although there are shouts, they are not shouts of joy.

34"The sound of their cry rises from Heshbon to Elealeh and Jahaz, from Zoar as far as Horonaim and Eglath Shelishiyah, for even the waters of Nimrim are dried up.

35In Moab I will put an end
to those who make offerings on the
high places
and burn incense to their gods,"
declares the LORD.

³⁶"So my heart laments for Moab like a flute;

it laments like a flute for the men of Kir Hareseth.

The wealth they acquired is gone.

³⁷Every head is shaved and every beard cut off; every hand is slashed and every waist is covered with sackcloth.

38On all the roofs in Moab and in the public squares there is nothing but mourning, for I have broken Moab like a jar that no one wants," declares the LORD.

39"How shattered she is! How they wail! How Moab turns her back in shame! Moab has become an object of ridicule, an object of horror to all those around her."

⁴⁰This is what the LORD says:

"Look! An eagle is swooping down, spreading its wings over Moab.

⁴¹Kerioth will be captured and the strongholds taken. In that day the hearts of Moab's warriors will be like the heart of a woman in labor.

⁴²Moab will be destroyed as a nation because she defied the LORD.

⁴³Terror and pit and snare await you, O people of Moab,"

declares the LORD.

44"Whoever flees from the terror will fall into a pit, whoever climbs out of the pit will be caught in a snare; for I will bring upon Moab the year of her punishment,"

declares the LORD.

45"In the shadow of Heshbon
the fugitives stand helpless,
for a fire has gone out from Heshbon,
a blaze from the midst of Sihon;
it burns the foreheads of Moab,
the skulls of the noisy boasters.

46Woe to you, O Moab!
The people of Chemosh are destroyed;
your sons are taken into exile
and your daughters into captivity.

⁴⁷"Yet I will restore the fortunes of Moab in days to come,"

declares the LORD.

Here ends the judgment on Moab.

^{49:1}Concerning the Ammonites:

This is what the LORD says:

"Has Israel no sons? Has she no heirs?

Why then has Molech taken possession of Gad?

Why do his people live in its towns?

²But the days are coming," declares the LORD,

"when I will sound the battle cry against Rabbah of the Ammonites;

it will become a mound of ruins, and its surrounding villages will be set on fire.

Then Israel will drive out those who drove her out,"

says the LORD.

3"Wail, O Heshbon, for Ai is destroyed!
Cry out, O inhabitants of Rabbah!
Put on sackcloth and mourn;
rush here and there inside the walls,
for Molech will go into exile,

together with his priests and officials.

⁴Why do you boast of your valleys, boast of your valleys so fruitful?

O unfaithful daughter, you trust in your riches and say, 'Who will attack me?'

⁵I will bring terror on you from all those around you," declares the Lord, the LORD Almighty.

"Every one of you will be driven away, and no one will gather the fugitives.

6"Yet afterward, I will restore the fortunes of the Ammonites,"

declares the LORD.

⁷Concerning Edom:

This is what the LORD Almighty says:

"Is there no longer wisdom in Teman? Has counsel perished from the prudent? Has their wisdom decayed? ⁸Turn and flee, hide in deep caves, vou who live in Dedan, for I will bring disaster on Esau at the time I punish him. ⁹If grape pickers came to you, would they not leave a few grapes? If thieves came during the night, would they not steal only as much as they wanted? ¹⁰But I will strip Esau bare; I will uncover his hiding places, so that he cannot conceal himself. His children, relatives and neighbors will perish, and he will be no more. ¹¹Leave your orphans; I will protect their lives. Your widows too can trust in me."

12This is what the LORD says: "If those who do not deserve to drink the cup must drink it, why should you go unpunished? You will not go unpunished, but must drink it. ¹³I swear by myself," declares the LORD, "that Bozrah will become a ruin and an object of horror, of reproach and of cursing; and all its towns will be in ruins forever."

¹⁴I have heard a message from the LORD: An envoy was sent to the nations to say,

"Assemble yourselves to attack it! Rise up for battle!"

15"Now I will make you small among the nations,

despised among men.

¹⁶The terror you inspire and the pride of your heart have deceived you,

you who live in the clefts of the rocks, who occupy the heights of the hill.

Though you build your nest as high as the eagle's,

from there I will bring you down," declares the LORD.

17"Edom will become an object of horror; all who pass by will be appalled and will scoff

because of all its wounds.

¹⁸As Sodom and Gomorrah were overthrown, along with their neighboring towns," says the LORD,

"so no one will live there; no man will dwell in it.

19"Like a lion coming up from Jordan's thickets

to a rich pastureland,

I will chase Edom from its land in an instant.

Who is the chosen one I will appoint for this?

Who is like me and who can challenge me?
And what shepherd can stand against
me?"

²⁰Therefore, hear what the LORD has planned against Edom, what he has purposed against those who live in Teman:

The young of the flock will be dragged away;

he will completely destroy their pasture because of them.

²¹At the sound of their fall the earth will tremble;

their cry will resound to the Red Sea.

²²Look! An eagle will soar and swoop down,

spreading its wings over Bozrah.

In that day the hearts of Edom's warriors will be like the heart of a woman in labor.

²³Concerning Damascus:

"Hamath and Arpad are dismayed, for they have heard bad news.

They are disheartened, troubled like the restless sea.

²⁴Damascus has become feeble, she has turned to flee and panic has gripped her; anguish and pain have seized her, pain like that of a woman in labor.

²⁵Why has the city of renown not been abandoned,

the town in which I delight?

²⁶Surely, her young men will fall in the streets:

all her soldiers will be silenced in that day,"

declares the LORD Almighty.

²⁷"I will set fire to the walls of Damascus; it will consume the fortresses of Ben-Hadad."

²⁸Concerning Kedar and the kingdoms of Hazor, which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon attacked:

This is what the LORD says:

"Arise, and attack Kedar and destroy the people of the East.

²⁹Their tents and their flocks will be taken; their shelters will be carried off with all their goods and camels.

Men will shout to them,

'Terror on every side!'

30"Flee quickly away!
Stay in deep caves, you who live in Hazor,"

declares the LORD.

"Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon has plotted against you; he has devised a plan against you.

31"Arise and attack a nation at ease, which lives in confidence,"

declares the LORD,

"a nation that has neither gates nor bars; its people live alone.

32Their camels will become plunder, and their large herds will be booty.

I will scatter to the winds those who are in distant places and will bring disaster on them from every side,"

declares the LORD.

33"Hazor will become a haunt of jackals,

a desolate place forever. No one will live there; no man will dwell in it."

³⁴This is the word of the LORD that came to Jeremiah the prophet concerning Elam, early in the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah:

35This is what the LORD Almighty says:

"See, I will break the bow of Elam, the mainstay of their might.

³⁶I will bring against Elam the four winds from the four quarters of the heavens;

I will scatter them to the four winds, and there will not be a nation where Elam's exiles do not go.

37I will shatter Elam before their foes, before those who seek their lives; I will bring disaster upon them, even my fierce anger,"

declares the LORD.

"I will pursue them with the sword until I have made an end of them.

³⁸I will set my throne in Elam and destroy her king and officials," declares the LORD.

³⁹"Yet I will restore the fortunes of Elam in days to come,"

declares the LORD.

Original Meaning

46:1.9 THERE ARE two prophecies against Egypt:10 46:2–12 and 46:14–26. Only the first one is dated. The fourth year of Jehoiakim was 605 B.C., the year of the fateful battle at Carchemish (in northern Syria) between the forces of Pharaoh Neco and of Nebuchadnezzar (mentioned explicitly in

46:26). The Egyptians were routed, and Babylon began the process of claiming hegemony over the states in the eastern Mediterranean. Egyptian demise is predicted as part of the judgment in the historical process but not the end of the Egyptians themselves.

46:2–12. This oracle is directed to the army of Pharaoh Neco. In 609 B.C. Pharaoh's army had marched from Egypt toward Syria in order to join forces with the remnants of the Assyrian army and to oppose the emerging power of Babylon. At that time Josiah had attempted to head off the Egyptian army at Megiddo and was mortally wounded in the unsuccessful effort to thwart the Egyptian advance (2 Kings 23:29–30; 2 Chron. 35:20–24).

As noted above, the date of this oracle against the Egyptian army is the fourth year of Jehoiakim (605 B.C.). Jehoiakim was the Egyptian choice among Josiah's sons to follow his father in rule. The martial language of the oracle depicts elements of the Egyptian army preparing to fight and then fleeing in terror. Furthermore, the boastful pride of the Egyptians is described in imperialistic terms (v. 8), only to be reversed by divine judgment on a day that "belongs to the LORD" (v. 10). It is a day of vengeance to be directed against the Lord's foes, of which Egypt is one. In fact, the language of judgment on that decisive day is described in sacrificial terms.

Egypt is also described in familial terms as "Virgin Daughter" (v. 11). She who seeks a balm in Gilead will find that there is no healing for her.

46:13–26. Verse 13 is a prose introduction to the prophecy that follows. Unlike the companion oracle in 46:2–12, this prophecy is undated. Nebuchadnezzar did not invade Egypt until 570 B.C., late in his reign, but there were periodic encounters of various kinds between Egypt and Babylon throughout Jeremiah's lifetime. Essentially the prophecy announces that Babylon will work God's judgment on Egypt. At a basic interpretive level, such a claim is little different from those Jeremiah directed at Judah. In both instances Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar serve as the rod of historical judgment used by the Lord.

The disastrous event is a day in the future (v. 21). For some in Egypt it will be defeat and exile. As in the previous oracle, Egypt is personified as a female ("Daughter ... Egypt," v. 24)," who will be put to shame by a people from the north. Part of the judgment to come is directed at Amon, one of the

Egyptian deities (v. 25). Judgment, however, is not the end of Egypt as a nation; it will again be inhabited (v. 26).

46:27–28. Following the oracles against Egypt is a prediction of the restoration of God's people. Those on whom God's judgment has fallen have been disciplined justly, but in his mercy God will not make an end of them. Correspondingly, those whom God used to discipline his people (such as the Egyptians) will suffer the fate of those whose hubris, cruelty, and idolatry have kept them from acknowledging the work of God.

47:1–7. The Philistines¹² lived in some of the cities on the coast of Palestine. They had been neighbors and often enemies of Judah since the days of the judges. They were immigrants to the area, having come from some of the Aegean islands and southwestern Turkey in the twelfth century B.C.

Two Philistine cities are named here: Gaza and Ashkelon. The occasion for the oracle against the Philistines possibly comes with Nebuchadnezzar's preparations to attack Gaza (cf. v. 2, "waters ... rising in the north"). No extrabiblical records survive of a Babylonian attack on Gaza, but it is completely understandable that the Babylonians either fought against Gaza and subdued it or received the city's surrender. Gaza was a trading center and an important point of contact between Egypt, the states immediately to the north and east (e.g., Judah, Moab), and the Arab tribes from Sinai and the fringes of sedentary existence.

The assault in question could have been perpetrated by the Egyptians between 609 B.C., when Necho moved from Egypt to north Syria and 605, when the Egyptians were defeated at Carchemish. A first reading of 47:1 refers explicitly to an attack by an unnamed Pharaoh. There are two problems with this interpretation, although neither are insurmountable: (1) The Greek version of this verse omits the reference to the Pharaoh; (2) there is no record of an Egyptian attack on Gaza or Ashkelon in the period 609 and later. According to Herodotus (*Histories* 2.157) the Pharaoh before Necho did attack the Philistine city of Ashdod at some point before 610 B.C. At the present state of knowledge, therefore, it is difficult to place this oracle in a specific historical context, but there are several plausible options because of frequent military actions in the region.

In form and vocabulary, the oracle against the Philistines is similar to the preceding oracles against Egypt. The Philistines will be defeated on some

future day (v. 4). People will mourn for Gaza and Ashkelon. God's historical judgment is personified through a poetic address to his sword (v. 6).

48:1–25. The Moabites¹³ receive an extensive address in 48:1–47 that preserves a significant knowledge of geography. Over twenty different cities (settlements) are named in the poetic indictment of Judah's eastern neighbor. Moab occupied much of the tableland east of the Dead Sea. According to Genesis 19:30–38, a drunken Lot slept with his two daughters, and as a result they bore Moab and Ben-Ammi.¹⁴ The child named Moab is the ancestor of the Moabite people. Thus the Moabites and Israelites were distant relatives. Later, David's family was related to the Moabites through Ruth, his great-grandmother (Ruth 4:13–22). Solomon married a Moabite princess and built for her a temple to Chemosh, the chief Moabite deity, on the hill east of the temple mount in Jerusalem (1 Kings 11:7).

The repetition of a concluding prophetic formula ("declares the LORD") in 48:25, 30, 35, 38, 43, 44, 47 suggests that more than one prophetic announcement has been collected in Jeremiah 48. Correspondingly, Isaiah 15–16 has lengthy prophecies against Moab, from which some of this material in Jeremiah has been derived and elaborated upon.

Apart from 48:1a and the last phrase of verse 25, this long section does not have introductory or concluding formulae to break up the sequence of verses. It is possible that 48:1b–25 is a single unit of speech, offering mourning language, prediction of judgment and exile, and sarcasm in poetry, all designed to humiliate Moab.

Verse 7 mentions Chemosh. One way to refer to Moab was to call them "the people of Chemosh" (Num. 21:29). He, like his people, will suffer defeat and go into exile. In the future Moab will be ashamed of Chemosh, just as Israel was ashamed when trusting Bethel (v. 13). The name "Bethel" here likely refers to a deity rather than a place. He is known from Assyrian, Babylonian, and Jewish sources.¹⁵

Some of the judgment language in this section is frightful. There are references to salt (v. 9), an agent that ruins agricultural products, and to curses (v. 10) on whoever is lax in doing the Lord's work of execution. As with Egypt and Judah, Jeremiah uses familial language for Moab as a daughter (NIV has "Daughter of Dibon"). Her cities will be ruined, and she

will wail a funeral lament. Even physical mutilation is mentioned. Moab's "horn," a metaphor for strength, will be cut off and her arm broken.

48:26–47. These prophecies continue the depiction of Moab's humiliation and degradation. As with the previous oracle, the language is graphic. Moab will wallow in vomit (v. 26), cries of dereliction will be heard (vv. 34, 38), fire will scorch the country (v. 45), and the children of the nation will be taken into exile (v. 46).

So moved is the prophet by the intensity of depicting Moab's downfall that he portrays himself in mourning (vv. 31–32). The historical agent of all this destruction is not named explicitly (see comments below). Moab will be judged because "she defied the LORD" (v. 42).

The last line of these intricate poetic prophecies is one of restoration: God "will restore the fortunes of Moab in days to come" (v. 47). This is the same phrase God uses elsewhere in predicting the restoration of Israel.¹⁶

49:1–6. The oracle against the Ammonites¹⁷ is much briefer than the one against Moab. According to Genesis 19:30–38, Ben-Ammi, the ancestor of the Ammonites, was the incestuous son of Lot. The country of Ammon is located immediately north of Moab and east of the Jordan River. Ammon's chief deity was Milcom. Solomon married an Ammonite princess and built a temple for its worship on the hill east of the temple mount in Jerusalem (1 Kings 11:7). Baalis, king of Ammon at the time of Jerusalem's fall, plotted with Ishmael to murder Gedaliah, the Judean governor appointed by the Babylonians (Jer. 40–41).

Rabbah is the capital city of Ammon. Its remains form part of the impressive citadel at the heart of modern day Amman, Jordan. The judgment to come on Ammon is depicted as defeat and exile. No biblical or Babylonian accounts exist to document an official defeat of Ammon (or Moab), but both states fell under the control of Babylon.¹⁸

In verses 1 and 3 the NIV refers to "Molech" as having taken possession of Gad and then being sent into exile with his priests and officials. Elsewhere in Jeremiah, Molech is the name of the deity to whom child sacrifices are offered in Judah (32:35; cf. Lev. 20:2–5; 2 Kings 23:10). The NIV translators have rendered the Hebrew term *malkam* (lit., "their king") in 49:1, 3 as Molech, based on the reference to Molech as the Ammonite deity in 1 Kings 11:7 (but cf. NIV note). This seemingly logical move, however,

concerns a complicated matter over which considerable uncertainty remains.

As a name, Molech is a polemical hybrid because it combines the consonants of the word king (*m-l-k*) with the vowels from the word "shame." Molech and Milcom have the same consonants. In comparing the biblical references to Molech, it is not clear whether Milcom is the same deity as Molech. Jeremiah also refers to the deity of child sacrifice as Baal (Jer. 19:5). In brief, the Hebrew term *malkam* in 49:1, 3 can be rendered "their king," "Milcom," or (by inference from 1 Kings 11:7) "Molech." ¹⁹

As with Moab (with whom the Ammonites are sometimes linked), the Lord promises to restore the fortunes of Ammon.²⁰

49:7–22. Edom²¹ lies south of Moab in a high and remote region of Transjordan. It too will fall in judgment. Like Ammon and Moab, the Edomites are related to God's people—in their case, through Esau (Gen. 36). Esau is mentioned explicitly in Jeremiah 49:8, 10 as a synonym for Edom. The bitterness reflected in the relationship between Jacob and Esau was reflected later in the relationship between Judah and Edom in the days of Jeremiah and into the postexilic period. According to the lamentation of Psalm 137:7, Edom gleefully celebrated the fall of Jerusalem. A main goal of the short prophetic book of Obadiah is the announcement of judgment on Edom (cf. Mal. 1:2–5). Unlike the prophecies to Moab and Ammon, Jeremiah makes no reference to Edom's restoration.²²

The polemic against Edom begins with a reference to wisdom. Those who lived east of Palestine were celebrated as wise (cf. Job 1:3). Jeremiah's polemic against the Edomites depicts its day of judgment as the loss or failure of its wisdom. The region of Dedan (v. 8) is in the Arabian desert, but its inhabitants were linked with Edom through trade.

Bozrah (vv. 13, 22) is the capital city of Edom. Its ruins are located near the modern Jordanian village of Buseirah. Bozrah will drink the cup of wrath.²³ Edom's strongholds on mountains and in cliffs will not save them from destruction. Verse 19 depicts God as a lion coming upon Edom. His plan is to destroy them, which will come on a day that strikes fear into the heart of a warrior.

49:23–27. Damascus²⁴ (i.e., the capital of Aramean southern Syria) is another object of prophetic judgment. Perhaps Damascus is named among

the oracles because of the Aramean raids reported in 2 Kings 24:2. Damascus suffered devastating attacks from the Assyrians in the ninth and eighth centuries because it was a persistent ringleader in the region for anti-Assyrian activities. History repeated itself when Babylon took Damascus.

Hamath and Arpad, two cities in northern Syria, are named in this oracle as regional cities who will be dismayed by the bad news of judgment to fall on the area. Damascus is personified as a weak woman with pain like that which comes with labor. The reference to Ben-Hadad (v. 27) comes in an "update" of Amos's prophecy (Amos 1:3–4) against Damascus. Hadad is a well-known Aramean deity, and the name Ben-Hadad designates a king as the adopted "son" (*ben* means "son") of the deity. Several kings from Damascus had this name/title (e.g., 2 Kings 6:24).

49:28–33. Kedar²⁵ is a region of northern Arabia; the Kedarites are mentioned in Psalm 120:5 and Isaiah 42:11. Hazor is something of a mystery since no location with that name is known in northern Arabia.²⁶ In any case, Kedar and Hazor most likely refer to Arab tribesmen who were attacked by the Babylonians in Nebuchadnezzar's sixth year (winter of 599 B.C.).²⁷ The "people of the East" are associated with Kedar. They live in tents, travel using camels, and keep sheep and goats. These peoples are known in other sources as Arabs.²⁸

49:34–39. The prophecy against Elam²⁹ is dated early in the reign of Zedekiah. Just why Elam is singled out is a mystery. In the Greek version of the oracles, Elam comes first. Perhaps the reason Elam is cited is that it was the object of a campaign by Nebuchadnezzar. If so, only suggestive evidence survives regarding the campaign. Elam will also be restored by God. As with other matters of grace, no merit or reason is cited for this announcement.

Bridging Contexts

THEOLOGY BEHIND THE ORACLES. The fact that the oracles against the nations are collected together and placed at the end of the book of Jeremiah suggests that they are preserved as witnesses to God's sovereign justice and are to be read and pondered by those who come after the prophet. They demonstrate that Jeremiah was a prophet to the nations. Some of the things they announce (e.g., Egypt's capitulation to Babylon or Moab's forced

acceptance of foreign domination) give evidence for the ongoing efficacy of God's Word in shaping and interpreting history. Other elements (e.g., the hubris of Ammon) indicate what kind of attitudes and activities are displeasing to the Lord.

With proper acknowledgment of the contingent and the particular, these oracles continue to bear witness to the outworking of God's Word and against the corporate character traits that God disdains. They are valuable for more than simply compiling a checklist to see how and when, or if, judgment befell the nations addressed. Like all announcements of judgment, these oracles get the attention of audiences and warn them; they may serve other tasks than as simple predictors of what must unalterably come to pass.

Two assumptions of the oracles can be transferred to different times and places. (1) They assume without argument that God is the Creator of the broader historical process in which the nations find themselves. This is tantamount to the claim that God is Creator of the world, since creation in the Bible is not simply about a past act but about the ongoing interaction with God and the historical process. For example, God may employ the Egyptians for purposes unknown by them, and he may work through them to accomplish future plans.

(2) The oracles assume that there are recognized standards of conduct to which any group may be held accountable. God has the right to judge the nations, his standards are just, and he may restore the nations as part of a future in which his mercy is as surprising as his judgment.

Prophecy in this mode plays the role of protest against institutional injustice. It is Egypt as a nation and Ammon as a collection of tribes who are judged by God. In some ways the oracles against nations are the most public form of theological discourse in the Old Testament because they use moral standards by which to evaluate public policies and state-sponsored activities on an international scale.

Restoration possible. The oracles against the nations in Jeremiah should be read in light of other prophetic oracles against nations and also in light of the missionary concern of the New Testament that the gospel be preached among all nations.³⁰ Thus, one function of the Old Testament oracles is to indicate the "fallen" condition of institutional life and the need for both moral strictures and a mercy that leads to repentance and new life.

Even though the predominant note of the oracles in the Old Testament toward the nations is negative—that is, they have been weighed in the balance of divine justice and found wanting—it is crucial to note that the redeemed in John's vision come from every tribe and tongue (Rev. 5:9–10; cf. Dan. 7:14). God's sovereignty over the nations does not leave them without hope and fit only for retributive justice; in the good news of the New Testament (anticipated by the mysterious restoration passages in the oracles against the nations) the nations find healing for their sicknesses and spiritual strength to overcome the horrors of their inhumanity.

Contemporary Significance

Public Morality. Early in 1999 NATO forces made the decision to attack Yugoslavia because of charges that Serbian forces sponsored by Yugoslavia were involved in the "ethnic cleansing" of the Kosovo province where ethnic Albanians live. The Kosovo Albanians are predominantly Muslim in religion while the Serbs are predominately Orthodox Christians. The government rhetoric emanating from Washington was harsh on the Serbs and the Yugoslavian president, Slobodan Milosevic. We can debate the accuracy of the charges made by NATO or the Serbs, but the rhetoric is instructive in the ways in which standards of behavior are publicly and internationally judged.

A broad debate in the United States over the behavior of President Clinton centered around the issue of private versus public morality. The charges against the Serbs was that they had violated international standards of conduct and that their treatment of persons in their country could not be considered a private matter. To be sure, there are differences between the behavior of one public figure with citizens and that of an army against its own citizens, but the debate over moral standards and their application to public policies was similar.

Christians may differ over the degree to which they wanted President Clinton to answer for his indiscretions and over the way in which they wished to hold President Milosevic accountable in the international arena for actions taken against his own people. But Christians cannot give in to the argument that private indiscretions or internal oppressions are off-limits to broader scrutiny and evaluation. God is a moral Judge, and there are no "purely" private acts or internal policies that lack wider implications.

Interestingly, in the fall of 2000 Yugoslavian citizens took to the streets to denounce the way that Milosevic had attempted to thwart a democratic election process. Eventually he was forced out of the presidency. Many churches in Yugoslavia supported the nonviolent protests against Milosevic. Justice in corporate terms is never perfect or final, but because God is committed to it, God's people should be committed to it.

Christians in North America must face up to the fact that it is increasingly difficult (some would say philosophically and practically impossible) to have public discussions about the moral nature of public acts. It is difficult enough to have the discussion in the church! In broader society the pluralism is so vast that discussion is very, very difficult. The long tradition of oracles against the nations in the Old Testament are reminders, however, that God is not mocked. The wheels of justice employed by God may grind slowly and leave much unanswered from the limited vantage point of any generation, but a glance at the long histories of Egypt or Rome are solemn reminders that political power itself is no guarantee of right or continuing might.

For all of their particularity and stridency, the oracles against the nations are a good catalyst for the kind of discussions that Christians need to have about public values and their place in institutional life. The oracles put the emphasis on God, who evaluates rather than seeks an easy consensus on what the values are. Perhaps in North American society one cannot get consensus on the values, but this should not stop Christians from claiming that normative values exist and that they play an important role in the moral evaluation that history (and ultimately God) provides of nations. History, in this sense, is a penultimate method used by God to bring down the proud and the cruel.

Restoration. Mysterious affirmations come at the end of the oracles against Egypt, Moab, Ammon, and Elam, which proclaim restoration after their judgment. The good news is that God's judgment is often in the service of a wider saving purpose. His church will be comprised of people from every nation. In heaven this joyful fact is part of a song sung by the redeemed (Rev. 5). Should this not also be a song of the church on earth?

After prayer and study, a local congregation in Texas has adopted a plan to engage in mission work in the former Soviet province of Kazakhstan. There are few churches in this large area, which is located to the south of Russia and east of the Caspian Sea. To put it bluntly, the history of the region has been bleak in recent centuries. Most of the inhabitants are nominally Muslim, but the practice of religion was not encouraged in the region when the former USSR controlled it and sought to exploit its resources. When one thinks of the grim history of this broad section of Asia, it is easy to shudder and to wonder about moral purpose and justice in history. Christians, however, are called to look past the failures and dashed hopes that inhabit the region; they are called on to acknowledge the mysteries of God's judgment and rule, but most importantly, to believe that God's glory is to be revealed among the nations.

Attempts to discern meaning and purpose in the fate of nations is a most difficult task. Read any of the oracles against the nations in Jeremiah and one is reminded instantly that injustice and cruelty are constant historical companions. But so are the words of grace and future hope. The Texas congregation that has committed itself to mission work in Kazakhstan is seeking to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit and to be part of the work to which God has called all his people.

Jeremiah 50:1-51:64

¹THIS IS THE WORD the LORD spoke through Jeremiah the prophet concerning Babylon and the land of the Babylonians:

²"Announce and proclaim among the nations,
lift up a banner and proclaim it;
keep nothing back, but say,
'Babylon will be captured;
Bel will be put to shame,
Marduk filled with terror.
Her images will be put to shame
and her idols filled with terror.'
³A nation from the north will attack her and lay waste her land.

No one will live in it; both men and animals will flee away.

4"In those days, at that time," declares the LORD,
"the people of Israel and the people of Judah together will go in tears to seek the LORD their God.

⁵They will ask the way to Zion and turn their faces toward it.

They will come and bind themselves to the LORD in an everlasting covenant that will not be forgotten.

6"My people have been lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray and caused them to roam on the mountains.

They wandered over mountain and hill and forgot their own resting place.

7Wheever found them devoured them:

⁷Whoever found them devoured them; their enemies said, 'We are not guilty, for they sinned against the LORD, their true pasture, the LORD, the hope of their fathers.'

8"Flee out of Babylon; leave the land of the Babylonians, and be like the goats that lead the flock.

⁹For I will stir up and bring against Babylon an alliance of great nations from the land of the north. They will take up their positions against her, and from the north she will be captured.

Their arrows will be like skilled warriors who do not return empty-handed.

¹⁰So Babylonia will be plundered; all who plunder her will have their fill,"

declares the LORD.

11"Because you rejoice and are glad, you who pillage my inheritance, because you frolic like a heifer threshing grain and neigh like stallions,
12 your mother will be greatly ashamed; she who gave you birth will be disgraced.

She will be the least of the nations—a wilderness, a dry land, a desert.

¹³Because of the LORD's anger she will not be inhabited but will be completely desolate.

All who pass Babylon will be horrified and scoff

because of all her wounds.

¹⁴"Take up your positions around Babylon, all you who draw the bow.

Shoot at her! Spare no arrows, for she has sinned against the LORD.

15Shout against her on every side! She surrenders, her towers fall, her walls are torn down.

Since this is the vengeance of the LORD, take vengeance on her;

do to her as she has done to others.

¹⁶Cut off from Babylon the sower, and the reaper with his sickle at harvest.

Because of the sword of the oppressor let everyone return to his own people, let everyone flee to his own land.

17"Israel is a scattered flock that lions have chased away. The first to devour him was the king of Assyria; the last to crush his bones was Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon."

¹⁸Therefore this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says:

"I will punish the king of Babylon and his land as I punished the king of Assyria.

19 But I will bring Israel back to his own pasture and he will graze on Carmel and Bashan; his appetite will be satisfied on the hills of Ephraim and Gilead.

20 In those days, at that time," declares the LORD, "search will be made for Israel's guilt, but there will be none, and for the sins of Judah, but none will be found,

for I will forgive the remnant I spare.

²¹"Attack the land of Merathaim

and those who live in Pekod.

Pursue, kill and completely destroy them,"

declares the LORD.

"Do everything I have commanded you.

²²The noise of battle is in the land, the noise of great destruction!

²³How broken and shattered is the hammer of the whole earth!

How desolate is Babylon among the nations!

²⁴I set a trap for you, O Babylon,and you were caught before you knew it;

you were found and captured because you opposed the LORD.

²⁵The LORD has opened his arsenal and brought out the weapons of his wrath,

for the Sovereign LORD Almighty has work to do in the land of the Babylonians.

²⁶Come against her from afar.
Break open her granaries;
pile her up like heaps of grain.

Completely destroy her and leave her no remnant.

²⁷Kill all her young bulls; let them go down to the slaughter!

Woe to them! For their day has come, the time for them to be punished.

²⁸Listen to the fugitives and refugees from Babylon declaring in Zion how the LORD our God has taken

ow the LOKD our God has taken vengeance,

vengeance for his temple.

29"Summon archers against Babylon, all those who draw the bow.
Encamp all around her; let no one escape.
Repay her for her deeds; do to her as she has done.
For she has defied the LORD, the Holy One of Israel.
30 Therefore, her young men will fall in the streets; all her soldiers will be silenced in that

declares the LORD.

31"See, I am against you, O arrogant one," declares the Lord, the LORD Almighty,

"for your day has come, the time for you to be punished.

day,"

32The arrogant one will stumble and fall and no one will help her up; I will kindle a fire in her towns that will consume all who are around her."

³³This is what the LORD Almighty says:

"The people of Israel are oppressed, and the people of Judah as well.

All their captors hold them fast, refusing to let them go.

34Yet their Redeemer is strong; the LORD Almighty is his name.

He will vigorously defend their cause so that he may bring rest to their land,

but unrest to those who live in Babylon.

35"A sword against the Babylonians!" declares the LORD—

"against those who live in Babylon and against her officials and wise men!

³⁶A sword against her false prophets! They will become fools.

A sword against her warriors! They will be filled with terror.

³⁷A sword against her horses and chariots and all the foreigners in her ranks! They will become women.

A sword against her treasures! They will be plundered.

38A drought on her waters!

They will dry up.

For it is a land of idels

For it is a land of idols, idols that will go mad with terror.

39"So desert creatures and hyenas will live there,
and there the owl will dwell.
It will never again be inhabited or lived in from generation to generation.

⁴⁰As God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah along with their neighboring towns," declares the LORD,

"so no one will live there; no man will dwell in it.

41"Look! An army is coming from the north; a great nation and many kings

are being stirred up from the ends of the earth.

⁴²They are armed with bows and spears; they are cruel and without mercy.

They sound like the roaring sea as they ride on their horses;

they come like men in battle formation to attack you, O Daughter of Babylon.

43The king of Babylon has heard reports about them,

and his hands hang limp.

Anguish has gripped him, pain like that of a woman in labor.

⁴⁴Like a lion coming up from Jordan's thickets

to a rich pastureland,

I will chase Babylon from its land in an instant.

Who is the chosen one I will appoint for this?

Who is like me and who can challenge me?
And what shepherd can stand against
me?"

⁴⁵Therefore, hear what the LORD has planned against Babylon, what he has purposed against the land of the Babylonians:

The young of the flock will be dragged away;

he will completely destroy their pasture because of them.

⁴⁶At the sound of Babylon's capture the earth will tremble; its cry will resound among the nations.

51:1 This is what the LORD says:

"See, I will stir up the spirit of a destroyer against Babylon and the people of Leb Kamai.

²I will send foreigners to Babylon to winnow her and to devastate her land;

they will oppose her on every side in the day of her disaster.

³Let not the archer string his bow, nor let him put on his armor.

Do not spare her young men; completely destroy her army.

⁴They will fall down slain in Babylon, fatally wounded in her streets.

⁵For Israel and Judah have not been forsaken by their God, the LORD Almighty,

though their land is full of guilt before the Holy One of Israel.

6"Flee from Babylon!
Run for your lives!
Do not be destroyed because of her sins.

It is time for the LORD's vengeance; he will pay her what she deserves.

⁷Babylon was a gold cup in the LORD's hand:

she made the whole earth drunk.

The nations drank her wine; therefore they have now gone mad.

⁸Babylon will suddenly fall and be broken. Wail over her!

Get balm for her pain; perhaps she can be healed.

9""We would have healed Babylon,

but she cannot be healed; let us leave her and each go to his own land, for her judgment reaches to the skies, it rises as high as the clouds.'

10""The LORD has vindicated us; come, let us tell in Zion what the LORD our God has done."

11"Sharpen the arrows,
take up the shields!
The LORD has stirred up the kings of the
Medes,
because his purpose is to destroy
Babylon.

The LORD will take vengeance, vengeance for his temple.

12Lift up a banner against the walls of Babylon! Reinforce the guard,

station the watchmen, prepare an ambush!

The LORD will carry out his purpose, his decree against the people of Babylon.

¹³You who live by many waters and are rich in treasures, your end has come, the time for you to be cut off.

¹⁴The LORD Almighty has sworn by himself:

I will surely fill you with men, as with a swarm of locusts, and they will shout in triumph over you. 15"He made the earth by his power; he founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding.

When he thunders, the waters in the heavens roar;he makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth.

He sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses.

17"Every man is senseless and without knowledge; every goldsmith is shamed by his idols. His images are a fraud; they have no breath in them.

¹⁸They are worthless, the objects of mockery; when their judgment comes, they will perish.

19He who is the Portion of Jacob is not like these,

for he is the Maker of all things, including the tribe of his inheritance—the LORD Almighty is his name.

20"You are my war club, my weapon for battle—
with you I shatter nations, with you I destroy kingdoms,
21with you I shatter horse and rider, with you I shatter chariot and driver,
22with you I shatter man and woman, with you I shatter old man and youth, with you I shatter young man and maiden, ²³with you I shatter shepherd and flock, with you I shatter farmer and oxen, with you I shatter governors and officials.

²⁴"Before your eyes I will repay Babylon and all who live in Babylonia for all the wrong they have done in Zion," declares the LORD.

25"I am against you, O destroying mountain, you who destroy the whole earth," declares the LORD.

"I will stretch out my hand against you, roll you off the cliffs, and make you a burned-out mountain.

No rock will be taken from you for a cornerstone, nor any stone for a foundation, for you will be desolate forever," declares the LORD.

27"Lift up a banner in the land!
Blow the trumpet among the nations!
Prepare the nations for battle against her;
summon against her these kingdoms:
Ararat, Minni and Ashkenaz.

Appoint a commander against her; send up horses like a swarm of locusts.

²⁸Prepare the nations for battle against her

the kings of the Medes,
their governors and all their officials,
and all the countries they rule.

29 The land trembles and writhes,
for the LORD's purposes against
Babylon stand—
to lay waste the land of Babylon

so that no one will live there.

30 Babylon's warriors have stopped fighting; they remain in their strongholds. Their strength is exhausted; they have become like women. Her dwellings are set on fire; the bars of her gates are broken.

31 One courier follows another and messenger follows messenger to announce to the king of Babylon that his entire city is captured,

32 the river crossings seized, the marshes set on fire, and the soldiers terrified."

³³This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says:

"The Daughter of Babylon is like a threshing floor at the time it is trampled; the time to harvest her will soon come."

34"Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon has devoured us, he has thrown us into confusion, he has made us an empty jar.
Like a serpent he has swallowed us and filled his stomach with our delicacies, and then has spewed us out.
35May the violence done to our flesh be upon Babylon," say the inhabitants of Zion.

"May our blood be on those who live in Babylonia," says Jerusalem.

³⁶Therefore, this is what the LORD says:

"See, I will defend your cause and avenge you; I will dry up her sea and make her springs dry. ³⁷Babylon will be a heap of ruins, a haunt of jackals, an object of horror and scorn, a place where no one lives. ³⁸Her people all roar like young lions, they growl like lion cubs. ³⁹But while they are aroused, I will set out a feast for them and make them drunk. so that they shout with laughter then sleep forever and not awake," declares the LORD.

⁴⁰"I will bring them down like lambs to the slaughter, like rams and goats.

41"How Sheshach will be captured, the boast of the whole earth seized!
 What a horror Babylon will be among the nations!
 42The sea will rise over Babylon;

⁴²The sea will rise over Babylon; its roaring waves will cover her.

43Her towns will be desolate,
 a dry and desert land,
 a land where no one lives,
 through which no man travels.
 44I will punish Bel in Babylon

and make him spew out what he has swallowed.

The nations will no longer stream to him. And the wall of Babylon will fall.

45"Come out of her, my people!
Run for your lives!
Run from the fierce anger of the LORD.

⁴⁶Do not lose heart or be afraid when rumors are heard in the land; one rumor comes this year, another the next,

rumors of violence in the land and of ruler against ruler.

⁴⁷For the time will surely come when I will punish the idols of Babylon;

her whole land will be disgraced and her slain will all lie fallen within her.

48Then heaven and earth and all that is in them will shout for joy over Babylon, for out of the north destroyers will attack her," declares the LORD.

49"Babylon must fall because of Israel's slain, just as the slain in all the earth have fallen because of Babylon.

50 You who have escaped the sword, leave and do not linger!
Remember the LORD in a distant land, and think on Jerusalem."

51"We are disgraced,
for we have been insulted
and shame covers our faces,
because foreigners have entered
the holy places of the LORD's house."

52"But days are coming," declares the LORD,

"when I will punish her idols, and throughout her land the wounded will groan.

53Even if Babylon reaches the sky and fortifies her lofty stronghold, I will send destroyers against her," declares the LORD.

54"The sound of a cry comes from Babylon, the sound of great destruction from the land of the Babylonians.

55The LORD will destroy Babylon; he will silence her noisy din.

Waves of enemies will rage like great waters;

the roar of their voices will resound.

⁵⁶A destroyer will come against Babylon; her warriors will be captured, and their bows will be broken.

For the LORD is a God of retribution; he will repay in full.

⁵⁷I will make her officials and wise men drunk,

her governors, officers and warriors as well;

they will sleep forever and not awake," declares the King, whose name is the LORD Almighty.

⁵⁸This is what the LORD Almighty says:

"Babylon's thick wall will be leveled and her high gates set on fire; the peoples exhaust themselves for nothing, the nations' labor is only fuel for the flames."

⁵⁹This is the message Jeremiah gave to the staff officer Seraiah son of Neriah, the son of Mahseiah, when he went to Babylon with Zedekiah king of Judah in the fourth year of his reign. ⁶⁰Jeremiah had written on a scroll about all the disasters that would come upon Babylon—all that had been recorded concerning Babylon. ⁶¹He said to Seraiah, "When you get to Babylon, see that you read all these words aloud. ⁶²Then say, 'O LORD, you have said you will destroy this place, so that neither man nor animal will live in it; it will be desolate forever.' ⁶³When you finish reading this scroll, tie a stone to it and throw it into the Euphrates. ⁶⁴Then say, 'So will Babylon sink to rise no more because of the disaster I will bring upon her. And her people will fall.'"

The words of Jeremiah end here.

Original Meaning

THESE TWO CHAPTERS are a collection of poetic oracles interspersed with brief prose units of speech. They concern Babylon and God's just judgment on that nation for its arrogance and its oppression of others.³¹ They are not an original unity, but the material is brought together as testimony to the role that Babylon had played and would play in the divine economy. These chapters complete the collection of oracles about the nations begun in chapter 46.

These are not the only texts in Jeremiah to take up the topic of Babylon. Indeed, the impact of Babylon lies behind every line of the book as it now exists. In terms of historical context, the Babylonian threat has been a

primary concern of Judah's government since the defeat of Egypt at the battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C. In 597 the Babylonian army surrounded Jerusalem and received a surrender from young king Jehoiachin. There were many contacts between Judah and Babylon between 597 and the second siege and tragic destruction of Jerusalem in 588–586. Explicit references to Babylon and to Nebuchadnezzar occur in chapters 21, 24–25, 27–29, 32, 34–35, 37–44. The Babylonian defeat of Judah and the fall of Jerusalem are what shape this book.

The theme of the oracles in chapters 50–51 is the downfall of Babylon, sometimes depicted as already accomplished and sometimes represented as a future event. In this they differ from most of the other references to Babylon in Jeremiah, which assume that Babylonian supremacy has been divinely given and exercised in judgment against Judah and Jerusalem.³² The city of Babylon fell in October 539 B.C. to invaders led by Cyrus the Great.

In a remarkable turnaround, chapters 50–51 portray Babylon's fall in language similar to that used elsewhere in Jeremiah to portray Judah's fall to Babylon. Hostile forces will be arrayed against Babylon, and there will be no deliverance from them. Thus, some scholars have wondered how the prophet, who so assiduously announced Babylonian supremacy, could have made such a complete turnaround. Indeed, a close reading of modern commentaries shows that some authors think these oracles against Babylon come from the prophet's editors rather than the prophet himself.³³

But there is no compelling reason why Jeremiah, who announced the defeat of Judah at the hands of Babylon, could not also have announced the defeat of tyrant Babylon. The two claims are not inconsistent with each other, and there is no objection on the basis of the content of the chapters to assigning the oracles a place in Jeremiah's own lifetime. As noted above, they probably did originate over a period of time—probably they were put together by the prophet's editors—but the theology that undergirds the oracles is vintage Jeremiah. God used Babylon to judge Judah. But Babylon had exercised its role with extreme arrogance and cruelty and had done so in mocking defiance of Jeremiah's claim that it served the Lord, the God of Israel.

Chapter 50 intersperses the doom oracles against Babylon with briefer affirmations of Judah's deliverance (e.g., 50:4–5). The prophecy to strike

Babylon is part of the Lord's plan and purpose (51:45). Even as Judah ultimately will be delivered, a foe from the north will wreak havoc on Babylon (50:3, 41). This is a classic reversal motif—previously Jeremiah had spoken of the foe from the north who would threaten Judah (1:13–14; 5:15–17; 6:22). The sword will flash against Babylon (50:35–37) and all her inhabitants.³⁴ Babylon, which was a tool in the hands of the Lord, exercised an arrogance that provoked him to judgment (50:14–15, 29–31).

One of the ways in which the judgment is depicted is sarcasm. Babylon is lampooned as a rebellious city (*Merathaim*, 50:21) and as punishment (*Pekod*, 50:21). Both names are puns on aspects of Babylonian geography or tribesmen.³⁵ Another way is the symbolism of battle forces arrayed against the city (50:14, 35). Babylon will be destroyed because of idolatry (50:2).

50:1–10. The fall of Babylon is to be proclaimed among the nations. Perhaps this is because Babylon had subjugated a number of them, and there will be rejoicing in more than one corner of the former empire. Another reason perhaps is the public declaration of the Lord's sovereignty by announcing the fact in public and in advance.

As in the prophecies in the book of the covenant (chs. 30–31), remnants from Israel and Judah will seek the Lord and a way back to Zion. They are currently like lost sheep, but they will return to their true Shepherd, "the hope of their fathers." The prophet urges them to flee out of Babylon (cf. 51:6). This is not contradictory to the advice given in 29:4–9, that the exiles should build houses in Babylon and pray for the welfare of the city. That same chapter indicated a coming time when God will restore his people. The defeat of Babylon will indicate that restoration is on the horizon.

50:11–17. Babylon's joy in pillaging Judah (God's "inheritance") will be turned to great shame. Babylon is personified here as the mother of the Babylonian people. Portraying cities as female persons is common in the Old Testament, but this imagery will be taken up in the New Testament, where Babylon is portrayed as a great prostitute (Rev. 17–18).

In poetic reversal pattern, Babylon will be besieged and defeated. Verse 15 is a somber cry: "Since this is the vengeance of the LORD, take vengeance on her; do to her as she has done to others." This proclamation is also an example of the "act and consequence" theology espoused by many biblical writers. What Babylon has set in motion will come around to her.

- **50:18–32.** Imperialistic Babylon is compared to Assyria, the earlier conqueror of Israel and much of the Near East. As with Assyria, so with Babylon—God will judge the oppressor. Twice the language of judgment against Babylon uses the verb *ḥrm* ("to devote to ritual destruction").³⁶ Vengeance on God's part is another motive for judgment (v. 28; cf. 51:11).
- **50:33–46.** God is strong, not just as Judge of iniquity, but as the Redeemer of his people. Verse 34 celebrates God as the One who vindicates his people's cause.³⁷

The overthrow of Babylon is compared to that of Sodom and Gomorrah. Again the prophet uses the language of military attack and siege to describe the coming fall of Babylon. Verse 44 alludes to either a people or an individual who will do God's bidding and take Babylon. Possibly this refers to the Medes and Persians or even to Cyrus himself (cf. Isa. 45:1), but one cannot be sure. As Jeremiah 50:9; 51:27–28 indicate, God has summoned several groups against Babylon. These claims elaborate on the theme that a foe from the north will attack Babylon.

51:1–23. Chapter 51 continues the contrast between the coming deliverance of Judean exiles and the judgment to befall Babylon. Much of the imagery of judgment on Babylon and redemption for Israel is repeated from or similar to that in chapter 50. One of the poetic symbols Jeremiah uses is that of the "cup," a vessel that indicates the future when its contents are consumed. In 51:7 Babylon itself is depicted as a cup from which Judah and the nations drank, but now it is ready to be smashed.³⁸

Verses 15–19 celebrate the creative power and wisdom of God. The sentiments expressed here are similar to those in chapter 10, where again the character of the true God is set in the context of the foolishness and idolatry of the nations. In contrast to human idol-makers, God is "the Maker of all things."

51:24–58. These verses portray four of Babylon's neighbors as threats.³⁹ The Medes are mentioned twice (51:11, 28). They were a people to the north and east of Babylon who were incorporated into the Persian state created by Cyrus the Great. Ararat, Minni, and the Ashkenaz (51:27–28) were also peoples from the north and northeast of Babylon. Along with the Medes and the Persians, they may reflect collectively the "foe from the north" who will strike Babylon.

In 51:34–40 personified Jerusalem speaks, and the Lord replies that judgment will come on Babylon. In this context she (Jerusalem) speaks of the torment she has received from Babylon. Her first-person speech is similar to that found in the book of Lamentations.

The gods of Babylon are also judged in the fall of the city. Specifically mentioned is Bel (v. 44; cf. Isa. 46:1–2). The imagery of judgment against Babylon alludes to the tower of Babylon (Babel) in Genesis 11:1–9. God will send destroyers against Babylon, even if the city reaches the sky (Jer. 51:53).

51:59–64. The chapter concludes with a prose account of Seraiah, brother of Baruch, who traveled to Babylon in Zedekiah's fourth year (594/593). Apparently he was sent to Babylon on diplomatic business; Seraiah was from a family of scribes and was capable of writing and interpreting documents.⁴⁰ While in Babylon he performed a symbolic act to depict the judgment that would ultimately befall Babylon. Just as the written scroll sank when Seraiah threw it into the river, so will Babylon sink and rise no more.

The last line of the chapter states that "the words of Jeremiah end here." Readers do well to recall the way in which Jeremiah's work began. He was called to be a prophet to the nations. The literary arrangement of his words concludes with an extended prophecy against Babylon, the great imperial power of the day. But note how Jeremiah's words in collected form have lasted much longer than the great political and military foe of his day.

Bridging Contexts

JUDGING THE OPPRESSOR. Chapters 50–51 deal with God's judgment on Babylon, a judgment that came on the city in 539 B.C., when Cyrus the Great and his forces occupied the city and put the Babylonian Empire out of business. The influence of this word of judgment continued as the prophetic texts bore witness to the contrast between the ongoing life of the Judean exiles and the continuing decline of the once-proud city. Ultimately the city itself would be abandoned, giving additional confirmation of the prophetic depiction of its demise. Thus, at one level, chapters 50–51 are not only about announcing God's judgment but also serve as witness to the truthfulness of the claim that God has judged the oppressor in the historical

process. Modern application of these sentiments may begin by asking: Which current political entities offend the justice and moral order of God, and which afflict God's people who live among them?

Babylon as a symbol. Chapters 50–51 also serve as reminders that Jeremiah represented a dual theme with regard to Babylon. According to chapter 25, already in the time of Jehoiakim, when Babylon first loomed on the horizon as political master, the prophet announced not only that Babylon would be the agent of God's judgment but that it would also be the recipient of God's judgment. Thus, on another level, these chapters are part of that broader scriptural teaching concerning the ubiquity of sin and of fallen human nature. Babylon becomes a symbol—that is, both a historical illustration and a reminder—of the self-destructive consequences of arrogance, pride in wealth, oppression, and idolatry. They are destructive because they offend the moral order created by God and because they are ruinous to public, institutional life.

One will find additional confirmation of this in the book of Daniel, where Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon are one example of a type of oppressive government that arises periodically. Both Jeremiah and Daniel affirm that God has granted all of them historical supremacy for a time, yet they are—and their type always will be—subject to his judgment for their failures. Nahum similarly affirms God's judgment on Assyria as a great judicial act that frees Judah and others from the oppressive yoke of the tyrant.

Babylon, the evil and arrogant female, is a scriptural symbol that lives on in the inspired imagination of John, prophetic seer of the book of Revelation (Rev. 17–18). He uses the imagery of Babylon as a prostitute, oppressing the world over and drunk with the blood of the saints, as a means to describe the lethal power of imperial Rome. Here is an example of earlier biblical texts being interpreted and reapplied. The older prophetic word lives on in a new key, as again the greatest political and military power of the era persecutes God's people. Furthermore, John's apocalyptic depiction points Christians toward the future. Before the current age runs its course, there may be other arrogant powers that seek to dominate their neighbors. Readers are invited to see a pattern at work in the ebb and flow of the broad historical process.

Contemporary Significance

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY. God's judgment of Babylon is but a past act unless it is put in the broader contexts of God's historical purposes and the continuing validity of belief in a moral order through which he holds nations and institutions responsible for their actions. It is important to note that God's judgment is not simply a righteous reaction to arrogance and oppression; at the same time it is also zeal to defend his own. Notice how many times the deliverance of Israel and Judah is mentioned in these two chapters. Judgment comes in the historical process not only from God, the righteous Judge, but from God the zealous Defender of his people. This is a confession of faith that Christians are called to make in spite of the "messiness" and ambiguity of history.

Forms of deliverance. It is a sad fact that at the beginning of the twenty-first century Christians are being persecuted for their faith in several places around the world. When members of the church universal pray for the safety and deliverance of persecuted brothers and sisters, they do well to remember what forms deliverance takes in the historical process. Deliverance and freedom for God's people may well come through difficult and violent historical circumstances.

It is sobering to think of the military and political struggles in the last few years and their effects. The year 1989 brought the collapse of the Berlin Wall. December of that same year saw the Romanian dictator felled. The so-called "Gulf War" in 1991 may have prevented a wider conflagration from breaking out.

In 1999 there was much debate in the Western world about ways to react to the lethal and oppressive policies of Slobodan Milosevic, president of Yugoslavia and the architect of a brutal campaign by Serbians against the largely Muslim province of Kosovo. A primary debating point concerned the legitimacy of Western intervention in what seemed to be internal strife. One may debate the various reasons why Western forces ultimately began an air campaign against the Serbian forces, but one of them was the belief that universal standards of justice and decency had been violated by the Serbian aggression. Some persons argued, correctly it seems, that similar patterns of horrific ethnic persecution had happened recently in Rwanda between Hutu and Tutsi tribes, but no one had taken any action. It is this sense of a moral standard to which all can be held that partially underlies the claims of Jeremiah 50–51.

In pondering the judgments of history, perhaps no region is more strife-ridden and more difficult to understand than the Middle East. While Israelis and Arabs debate and fight—which they seem to do at the same time—there is the ongoing exodus of Arab Christians from the region. Understandably, Christians in other parts of the world lament the fact that brothers and sisters from the land of the Messiah are fleeing in such numbers that if current projections continue, in fifty years virtually all churches in Israel and Jordan will be museums.

Yes, the fleeing of Arab Christians is a tragedy. It may also be one of the ways in which God saves his people from a more terrible historical fate looming on the horizon. Hindsight often improves judgment, even for the church. Christians may find much about judgment in Jeremiah 50–51, but it is the hidden work of God to which we should also be drawn.

In all these questions about the judgment of oppressing nations, the Christian church finds itself caught up in debates about morality and the just exercise of force. These debates are good when they remind Christians that God is not mocked and that no nation or ethnic group will have the final say on Judgment Day. They can mislead if they allow people to think that it is only the "other side" that is wrong and sinful in God's assessment.

No group comes out unscathed in the book of Jeremiah. There is plenty of folly and failure to go around, whether in Judah or in Babylon. God's promise to rescue his people comes not because they are morally perfect, but because of the grace of his promise to them. His standards of judgment are a stark reminder of how much grace is needed for the rescue of the saints in any generation.

Jeremiah 52:1–34

ZEDEKIAH WAS TWENTY-ONE years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem eleven years. His mother's name was Hamutal daughter of Jeremiah; she was from Libnah. ²He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, just as Jehoiakim had done. ³It was because of the LORD's anger that all this happened to Jerusalem and Judah, and in the end he thrust them from his presence.

Now Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon.

⁴So in the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign, on the tenth day of the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon marched against Jerusalem with his whole army. They camped outside the city and built siege works all around it. ⁵The city was kept under siege until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah.

⁶By the ninth day of the fourth month the famine in the city had become so severe that there was no food for the people to eat. ⁷Then the city wall was broken through, and the whole army fled. They left the city at night through the gate between the two walls near the king's garden, though the Babylonians were surrounding the city. They fled toward the Arabah, ⁸but the Babylonian army pursued King Zedekiah and overtook him in the plains of Jericho. All his soldiers were separated from him and scattered, ⁹and he was captured.

He was taken to the king of Babylon at Riblah in the land of Hamath, where he pronounced sentence on him. ¹⁰There at Riblah the king of Babylon slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes; he also killed all the officials of Judah. ¹¹Then he put out Zedekiah's eyes, bound him with bronze

shackles and took him to Babylon, where he put him in prison till the day of his death.

¹²On the tenth day of the fifth month, in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard, who served the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. ¹³He set fire to the temple of the LORD, the royal palace and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down. ¹⁴The whole Babylonian army under the commander of the imperial guard broke down all the walls around Jerusalem. ¹⁵Nebuzaradan the commander of the guard carried into exile some of the poorest people and those who remained in the city, along with the rest of the craftsmen and those who had gone over to the king of Babylon. ¹⁶But Nebuzaradan left behind the rest of the poorest people of the land to work the vineyards and fields.

¹⁷The Babylonians broke up the bronze pillars, the movable stands and the bronze Sea that were at the temple of the LORD and they carried all the bronze to Babylon. ¹⁸They also took away the pots, shovels, wick trimmers, sprinkling bowls, dishes and all the bronze articles used in the temple service. ¹⁹The commander of the imperial guard took away the basins, censers, sprinkling bowls, pots, lampstands, dishes and bowls used for drink offerings—all that were made of pure gold or silver.

²⁰The bronze from the two pillars, the Sea and the twelve bronze bulls under it, and the movable stands, which King Solomon had made for the temple of the LORD, was more than could be weighed. ²¹Each of the pillars was eighteen cubits high and twelve cubits in circumference; each was four fingers thick, and hollow. ²²The bronze capital on top of the one pillar was five cubits high and was

decorated with a network and pomegranates of bronze all around. The other pillar, with its pomegranates, was similar. ²³There were ninety-six pomegranates on the sides; the total number of pomegranates above the surrounding network was a hundred.

²⁴The commander of the guard took as prisoners Seraiah the chief priest, Zephaniah the priest next in rank and the three doorkeepers. ²⁵Of those still in the city, he took the officer in charge of the fighting men, and seven royal advisers. He also took the secretary who was chief officer in charge of conscripting the people of the land and sixty of his men who were found in the city. ²⁶Nebuzaradan the commander took them all and brought them to the king of Babylon at Riblah. ²⁷There at Riblah, in the land of Hamath, the king had them executed.

So Judah went into captivity, away from her land. ²⁸This is the number of the people Nebuchadnezzar carried into exile:

in the seventh year, 3,023 Jews;

²⁹in Nebuchadnezzar's eighteenth year,
832 people from Jerusalem;

³⁰in his twenty-third year,
745 Jews taken into exile by
Nebuzaradan the commander of the imperial guard.

There were 4,600 people in all.

³¹In the thirty-seventh year of the exile of Jehoiachin king of Judah, in the year Evil-Merodach became king of Babylon, he released Jehoiachin king of Judah and freed him from prison on the twenty-fifth day of the twelfth month. ³²He spoke kindly to him and gave him a seat of honor higher than those

of the other kings who were with him in Babylon. ³³So Jehoiachin put aside his prison clothes and for the rest of his life ate regularly at the king's table. ³⁴Day by day the king of Babylon gave Jehoiachin a regular allowance as long as he lived, till the day of his death.

Original Meaning

CHAPTER 52, THE CONCLUSION to the book of Jeremiah, largely parallels the conclusion to the book of 2 Kings (2 Kings 24:20b–25:30). That the two accounts are similar is obvious; what is not at all obvious is the literary relationship between the two. Were details from one of the accounts copied for the other; and if so, which is the earlier of the two? The answer to either question is difficult to answer with any confidence—and neither question is as important as the role of the account in 2 Kings and in Jeremiah.

- (1) We begin by observing that at least two scriptural writers/editors believed that a *narrative* account of Jerusalem's tragic fall, coupled with the report that the exiled king Jehoiachin was still in Babylon until the reign of Evil-Merodach, was the appropriate place to conclude their respective "books."
- (2) The book of Jeremiah is not historical narrative in the sense that 1–2 Kings is, but its presentation of the prophet's work presupposes the historical context provided in Kings.
- (3) Not only is this last chapter of Jeremiah tragic in its details; it is somewhat repetitive and therefore anticlimactic. This may be a small clue to the literary relationship between Kings and Jeremiah. For sequential readers of this book, Jeremiah 37–44 has already provided details of the fall of Jerusalem and its aftermath, some of which get repeated in chapter 52 (cf. 39:1–10 with 52:4–16). The account in 2 Kings 25, however, follows the chronologically arranged, unfolding scheme of the larger work entitled 1–2 Kings. Perhaps, therefore, it was the compilers of Jeremiah who made a conscious decision to end the prophet's book in similar fashion to that of 2 Kings, even if that meant repeating material already used in the book.

If the scenario above is correct, it does not solve the issue of the literary relationship between the two accounts, as if it is certain that Jeremiah's

compiler(s) copied from 2 Kings; it only suggests that the way 2 Kings concludes influenced the way Jeremiah's compiler(s) concluded the prophet's book. There are, after all, significant differences between the two prose accounts. Given the fact that generally speaking the prose traditions of Jeremiah are similar linguistically to those in 1–2 Kings—suggesting to a number of scholars that the compilers of the two works were somehow related—it is more likely that the particular relationship between 2 Kings 25 and Jeremiah 52 goes back to the prehistory of the texts as we now have them rather than with one essentially copying the other. Both chapters contain prose traditions that have been shaped by the respective needs of the larger work in which they are included, and both were likely compiled in the exilic period.

To summarize: The ending of Jeremiah was likely influenced by the way 2 Kings concludes. It is difficult to discern if 2 Kings 25 is earlier in literary form than Jeremiah 52, since the prose traditions in Jeremiah's book have a lot in common with those in 1–2 Kings.

There are several minor differences between the Jeremiah and Kings accounts and one major difference. The major one is the omission of Gedaliah's assassination in Jeremiah 52 (cf. 2 Kings 25:22–26). The circumstances surrounding his death are certainly known to Jeremiah's compiler(s), since they are given a much fuller account in Jeremiah 40–41.

One minor difference comes in 52:11, where we read that Nebuchadnezzar put Zedekiah in prison until his death. The parallel in 2 Kings 25:7 simply notes that Zedekiah was blinded by the Babylonians, bound in fetters, and sent to Babylon. There is also a difference between the numbers of exiles cited in Jeremiah 52:28–30 when compared to the parallel data in 2 Kings. Moreover, Jeremiah 52:30 records another wave of exiles in Nebuchadnezzar's twenty-third year (582 B.C.), a detail not provided in 2 Kings. This deportation could be punishment for the assassination of Gedaliah, but the reason is not given.³

Jeremiah 52 provides a retrospective of approximately thirty years. It begins with the account of the Babylonian siege in 588 B.C. and concludes with the notice in 52:31–34 that Evil-Merodach had released Jehoiachin from prison and allowed him to eat at the royal table. Evil-Merodach is the Hebrew version of *Amel Marduk*, son and successor of Nebuchadnezzar, who had a short reign from 562–560 B.C. Jehoiachin would have been

approximately fifty-three years old at the time of his release.⁴ This last reference in chapter 52 gives the reader a likely indication of the date for the final compiling of the material in the book of Jeremiah.

Two different dates are given in Jeremiah 52 for the fall of the city to the Babylonians. They contribute directly to the differences one finds among scholars for the reconstructed date—either 587 or 586 B.C. In 52:12 the date is the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar (so also 2 Kings 25:8), while in 52:29 it is assigned to the eighteenth year. These look like—and perhaps are —contradictory dates. One solution to the problem is to posit a copyist error. But which date is the error? Those who posit a date for the destruction in 587 B.C. suggest that the nineteenth year is a mistake, whether one of improper calculation on the part of the writer or simply a copyist error. Another suggestion is to see the date in 52:12 (nineteenth year) as reflecting a nonaccession-year dating scheme for Nebuchadnezzar, while interpreting the eighteenth year of 52:29 as assuming an accession-year dating for his regnal years. This would make 586 B.C. the date of the city's fall.⁵

- **52:1–11.** The date of the ninth day and fourth month (v. 6) refers to the last year of Zedekiah's reign. The details of Zedekiah's capture should be compared with 39:1–7 and 2 Kings 25:1–7. Second Chronicles contains no narrative of Zedekiah's capture.
- **52:12–16.** This brief description of the city's fall should be compared with 39:8 and 2 Kings 25:8–12. A reader only of Jeremiah 39 would not know that Nebuzaradan was the official in charge of burning the city and the temple. Indeed, Jer. 39:8 does not even mention the burning of the temple, as do the other two accounts.
- **52:17–23.** This is a brief report of the looting of the temple (see also 2 Kings 25:13–17). A comparison of the two is fascinating. Each begins with a report that the Babylonians broke the bronze pillars, and there are similar details preserved between them. Nevertheless, each account preserves some distinctive elements. The Jeremiah account, which is the longer of the two, has more details about the carved pomegranates and the bronze pillars.
 - **52:24–27a.** These verses closely parallel 2 Kings 25:18–21.
- **52:27b–30.** These verses preserve references to two waves of exiles during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. The first wave came during the reign of Jehoiachin (597 B.C.), the second in 582 (see comments above).

52:31–34. This notice about Jehoiachin, which concludes Jeremiah, is paralled in 2 Kings 25:27–30, which also concludes 2 Kings. It is far more than a simple report about a minor monarch being long-exiled. The report undergirds a type of muted but stubborn faith. Even when the land of Judah and the city of Jerusalem lie in ruins, one from David's line still lives.

Bridging Contexts

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JEHOIACHIN'S RELEASE. Jeremiah 52 has a peculiar combination of a narrative that records recent events of a traumatic past with a concluding report that Jehoiachin, a member of the Davidic line and formerly king in Jerusalem for three months, was released from imprisonment in Babylon. This combination points to a way of reading the account as a lesson about the price of failure combined with an indication of a future open to the continuing efficacy of God's earlier promises made to David (2 Sam. 7; Jer. 23:5–6; 33:19–22).

Unless readers can draw continuing significance from narration about the past, past acts remain simply events that lie behind the present. Since a retelling of the past is typically done to uncover ways in which to understand the present, we should ask why the account of Jerusalem's fall is rehearsed (again). One reason is reflected in the widely quoted maxim, "Those who do not remember the past are doomed to repeat it." In the retelling of the story, we are instructed to live and learn from the mistakes of others. Such a reading can be instructive on the personal or the corporate level. It may point us toward introspection regarding our personal histories ("unfinished business") as well as the history of our nation and church.

The account of Jehoiachin's release comes like the small cloud of Elijah's ministry during a time of drought (1 Kings 18:41–46). There is the possibility of change and deliverance to come. The shape of that change is indicated by the person released. He is David's "son." Even though the final paragraph likely presupposes the death of Jehoiachin in Babylon, he is the agent of continuity in the Davidic line and thus the family history of the Messiah, which reaches its culmination in the birth of Jesus. A Christological reading of the chapter's conclusion grows out of the historical concerns of the compilers themselves. They wanted readers to know that all hope was not gone. Jehoiachin and his family were still living.

And while the shape of any hope was inchoate, readers are invited to do more than simply acknowledge the judgment of the past. They are invited to be open to a future predicated on God's promises to the Davidic house.

The basic point is this: The original readers of Jeremiah 52 looked back on judgment, but through the notice concerning Jehoiachin they were invited to look ahead to ways in which God would fulfill his promises to them. This posture can be similar to that of any generation of God's people. Christians, for example, look back on the founding events of their faith—the death and resurrection of David's greater Son—but they also look forward to the second coming of Christ, when he will bring God's promised redemption to its final stage. Christians, like the generations of the Judean exile, live between promise and fulfillment.

Contemporary Significance

BETWEEN THE TIMES. Because of his own and his people's failure, Moses did not enter the Promised Land. He did, however, see it from a distance. One might characterize his final point of view at Mount Pisgah as one between promise and fulfillment. He had the experience of having been led from Egypt, via Mount Sinai and the desert, to the edge of the Promised Land. He had tasted both victory and defeat, and though he himself gained a glimpse of the future, he ended his days before the surviving Israelites settled in the land promised to their ancestors.

Similarly, the point of view of Jeremiah 52 is that between the promise that judgment is not the end and the fulfillment of the promises of a better future and a ruler from David's line to come. This kind of dynamic in the lives of peoples and generations fits the profile of Christians. We are those who live "between the times," in the "already" of Christ's initial coming and in the "not yet" of his second advent, where sin and death still have their influence but where it is known that the future belongs to God. "For in this hope we were saved" (Rom. 8:24), wrote Paul. In the short term we are not invulnerable to failure and weakness, but the future realization of God's promised deliverance is sure—as sure and indestructible as Christ's resurrection from the dead.

God and the future. It is possible for those who "wait on the LORD" to renew their strength. It is possible because God provides the strength we

need in our times of need. It is possible because no matter how strong or resilient the enemy, the future belongs to God, who is faithful. How this happens is the mystery of grace. One cannot explain it by a formula; one can only point to the God of new beginnings as the faithful God and Lord of life and death.

Matthew's genealogy of Jesus runs through the line of Jehoiachin (Matt. 1:11–12). What a story is packed into that simple genealogical list. Here is inspired commentary on sacred history. It is a reminder of how decades and centuries play a part in God's redemptive work, even when their twists and turns seem only confusing. Who would have thought that a king exiled for thirty-seven years meant much of anything other than years of frustration?

Jeremiah 52 is the final word about an influential epoch in sacred history. It is the final witness of the prophet Jeremiah's book. What we do with the witness is the way in which the ending of the book becomes an instructional piece in the unfolding drama of our lives. Jehoiachin died in captivity, yet he provided the means by which the Davidic family and the promises to it could continue. Jehoiachin's greater Son arrived in the fullness of time only to die at the hands of another imperial power. The story of which the book of Jeremiah is a part is still unfolding because Christ is alive and because he calls the current generation of God's people to discipleship and faithful living. So comfort one another with these words.

Introduction to Lamentations

Occasion and Date

THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS consists of five chapters of Hebrew poetry, joined together by the common themes of sorrow over the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and the humiliation of Judah's population. Individual poems within the book may have been compiled soon after the destruction of the city or anytime between that date and the rebuilding of the temple in 520–515 B.C. None of them gives any indication that the temple has been rebuilt at the time of composition.

Whether the individual poems were all composed in Palestine or in one or more of the exilic communities of Jews in Egypt or Babylon cannot be determined conclusively. Scholars also differ over whether one author wrote all five chapters or a compiler brought together laments of different provenance for a liturgical purpose. The poetic style of the chapters is classical, with a vocalized rhythm characteristic of a lament,² and it fits historically in the exilic period.

Authorship

No AUTHOR IS named in the Hebrew version, and the book appears not in the prophetic section of the Hebrew Bible but in the last section, entitled "the Writings." Both of these points are understandable; much of the book gives voice to communal experience, there are few clues within the poetry itself to its human author(s), and the function of the book is different from that of a prophetic corpus.

The issue of authorship—regardless of who is responsible for it—is further complicated in that there are different voices expressed within the book.³ In chapters 1–2 Jerusalem is personified as "Daughter ... Zion" (1:6; 2:1, 4, 8, 10, 13, 18) and speaks on occasion (e.g., 1:9b, 11b–16; 2:22) to supplement the poet's voice. An anonymous individual in chapter 3, who possibly should be identified with the poet of the book, speaks through a first-person lament. Plural forms are used in chapter 4, where there are references to "our eyes" (4:17) and (lit.) "our steps" (4:18). The first-person plural voice continues in chapter 5 in what is essentially a communal

lament. The creativity of the human author(s) recedes behind the primary function of these poems, which is to articulate grief over the loss of Jerusalem and to speak aloud the devastating effects of Judah's sinfulness.

The earliest claim to human authorship comes in the Greek translation, where the first verse explicitly attributes the book to the weeping prophet Jeremiah.⁴ In some Greek and Latin manuscripts attribution to Jeremiah is repeated at the beginning of chapter 5, as if that chapter needed additional comment. Chapter 5 is essentially a communal lament, with much of it "voiced" in first-person plural.

Such an association with Jeremiah is an ancient and plausible one, but that the prophet actually wrote the poems is historically unlikely. On the surface it is plausible, given the fact that the prophecy of Jeremiah itself contains laments/complaints, both for himself and for Jerusalem/Judah.⁵ However, some of the emphases in Lamentations are different from the prophet's book,⁶ and the thrust of the poetry is prayerful and liturgical, not prophetic. In 2 Chronicles 35:25 Jeremiah is credited with a lamentation for King Josiah (640–609 B.C.), and its recitation by singers became a custom in Israel, but this is not likely a reference to the book of Lamentations.⁷ The early association of Lamentations with Jeremiah is the reason that it appears in most modern versions after the prophetic book. As a part of Scripture Lamentations has a complementary function with Jeremiah's prophecies, providing yet another inspired assessment of Judah's fate.

Although it is unlikely that Jeremiah is the author of Lamentations, its association with him is one of several indications that the work fits into the broader context of the prophet's later life and times. The effects of the Babylonian army in besieging Jerusalem and in finally burning the city and temple precincts are everywhere reflected in the poignancy of the poetry. Someday Judah's humiliation will end (Lam. 4:22), but there is nothing in the poems to indicate that either Jerusalem or the temple have been rebuilt. In short, the perspective of the voices in Lamentations is that of the Babylonian exile.

At some point in the Exile Judeans began to lament corporately and publicly in order to remember Jerusalem, the capital city, the location of the temple, and the symbolic mother of the people. Already in Jeremiah (Jer. 41:4–8), there is the account of pious men from the former Israelite territories traveling to the ruins of the temple in Jerusalem in order to

worship. Their beards were shaved, their clothes torn, and their bodies gashed in order to mourn its destruction. According to Zechariah 7:1–7, there was traditional mourning in the fifth month of the year, and the prophet was asked about its efficacy and whether it should continue. The fifth month is the month of Ab (July/August), the same month of the temple's destruction. Thus within the lifetime of those who witnessed the temple's destruction, there developed ceremonial lamentation to bewail and remember the tragedy, and the book of Lamentations is one result of these rituals.

Structure and Literary Style of the Book

THE FIVE POETIC CHAPTERS do not have a narrative base or reflect a literary plot. As noted above, it is not clear whether the five chapters were always joined in a collection or if one or more of them originated independently of the others. Thus, the effect of reading them sequentially is that of artful repetition, where the themes of suffering, judgment, confession of sin, and divine abandonment reappear.

The book does have, however, clear subunits based on the five chapters. Each of the chapters is arranged in a recognizable pattern—that is, they are in poetry9—and each follows an aspect of the Semitic alphabet. Lamentations 1—4 are known as acrostics because the poetic verses are arranged in a pattern following the sequence of the twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet. The first word of each verse in chapters 1 and 2 begins with a different letter of the alphabet and follows the alphabetic sequence of twenty-two letters from beginning to end. That is, 1:1 and 2:1 begin with a word whose initial letter is aleph (N), and 1:22 and 2:22 begin with a word whose initial letter is taw (\Box). Chapter 3 has sixty-six verses but follows the same acrostic pattern, in three-verse units. Chapter 4 follows the pattern outlined for chapters 1 and 2.

Chapter 5 is somewhat different; it has twenty-two verses—as do chapters 1, 2, and 4—but the initial word of each verse in chapter 5 does not follow the alphabetical sequence. For this reason, most scholars do not describe chapter 5 as an acrostic. Although technically correct, the number of verses in chapter 5 is not likely coincidence.

Readers are left to infer the significance of the alphabetic pattern. Perhaps the best explanation is that the pattern is meant to signify fullness or completeness, something like the English expression "from A to Z" or the expression in the Revelation to John that the risen Lord is "the Alpha and the Omega ... the Beginning and the End" (Rev. 22:13; cf. 1:8). The acrostic provides a structure for the public expression of emotion and the development of a theme. Once hearers or readers know that a communication is following an acrostic pattern, they may anticipate its length and know something of the medium of the message.

Within the literature of the Old Testament, the book of Lamentations has literary parallels with funeral laments, the psalms of lament/complaint, Job's complaints against God and friends, and prophetic oracles against nations. On hearing the account of Saul and Jonathan's death, for example, David composed a poetic funeral oration (2 Sam. 1:19–27). It contains themes that one also finds in Lamentations. For example, 2 Samuel 1:19 begins with reference to Saul as the "glory" of Israel, who "lies slain"; Lamentations 4:20 describes King Zedekiah as the "LORD's anointed, our very life breath," as caught in the captors' trap. Twice the oration cries out that "the mighty have fallen" (2 Sam. 1:25, 27), in tragic contrast to the praise of Saul and Jonathan's royalty (1:23–24). Repeatedly the book of Lamentations refers to the fall and humiliation of Jerusalem, who is personified as a princess (Lam. 1:1, 6), one cast down from heaven (2:1), and as perfect in beauty (2:15).¹³

Approximately half of Psalms is comprised of individual and corporate laments/complaints, with those of individuals being the most frequent. These psalms have some or all of the following formal characteristics: complaints and/or cries of dereliction, petitions for deliverance and/or judgment on the enemies, confessions of sin, expressions of trust, and vows. Lamentations 3 and 5 have enough of these formal characteristics to be described as an individual and a corporate lament respectively, quite apart from their place in the book.

A poignant parallel to the voices of Lamentations comes in the defiant voice of the exiles in Psalm 137, where the pain over the fall of Jerusalem is raw and the anger toward the Edomites is palpable (v. 7). Edom too is remembered in Lamentations (Lam. 4:21–22). The individual voice of

chapter 3 finds parallels in the psalms of individual lament/complaint,¹⁵ the complaints of Jeremiah, and those of Job to God.

There are city laments in ancient Near Eastern literature, which are also related to the book of Lamentations. These are compositions that reflect on the fall of a city and its temple(s). The best-known examples are much earlier than the sixth century B.C. and come from Mesopotamia. In some of them a prominent place is given to the patron goddess of the city, who mourns the fall of her city. Since there is no counterpart to the patron goddess in Judah (at least not among the circles responsible for the Old Testament), it is possible that the prominence given to personified Jerusalem as "Daughter ... Zion" and the symbolic mother of the faithful is the Israelite counterpart to the broader, ancient Near Eastern tradition of patron goddesses. Recognition of Jerusalem's voice and personification is crucial to an adequate grasp of the book's style and its message.

A common category among prophetic books is that of oracles against foreign nations. The language is typically poetic, often mixed with sarcasm and invective, and holds out the claim of God's judgment to fall on the arrogance and cruelty of the states. Isaiah 47:1–15 is a splendid example of judgment depicted to fall on Babylon, the same power that besieged Jerusalem and brought Judah to a sorrowful end. The city of Babylon ("Virgin Daughter ... Babylon", 47:1) is depicted as a humiliated queen, bereft of her symbols of royalty and exposed shamefully. Widowhood will be her fate as judgment for her oppression and cruelty falls on her. The personification of Babylon as an exposed female, as a widow bereft of children, and as helpless before the onslaught are all portrayals repeated for Jerusalem in Lamentations.

The characteristics noted above are sufficient to indicate that Lamentations' contents are *traditional* in the typical cultural sense of the term. In the Israelite funeral, in individual and corporate laments, and in the broad tradition of lamenting the demise of a city, there are recognized formal characteristics and terminology that bear the emotions fit for the particular occasion. Lamentations brings these traditional elements together as a result of Judah's demise at the hands of the Babylonians.

Theology and Significance

ONE INDICATION OF LAMENTATIONS' significance comes in its use. As suggested above, the poetry provided a vehicle for a communal voice to lament the horror of Judah's fall. At some point in the exilic or postexilic period, God's people used the poetry that now comprises the book in public ceremonies of lamenting the temple's destruction. Whether initially or as a later development, these ceremonies became regularized as an annual event (cf. discussion in previous section). Likely the annual ceremony took place in certain exilic communities and among Jews who returned to rebuild the city and temple during the Persian period.

With the tragedy of the Roman capture and destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the mourning ritual over the Babylonian destruction was supplemented with mourning for the later Roman destruction. That destruction of Jerusalem and the temple complex was every bit as traumatic as the earlier devastation wrought by the Babylonians. The joining of the two events through the memory of ritual lamentation is the result of "telescoping"; that is, a ceremony occasioned by an earlier event becomes the focal point for also remembering a later and similar event. Thus, in classical Judaism the ninth of Ab is a one-day ceremony (in August) in which Jews read the book of Lamentations, and through its mournful language, worshipers recall the two destructions of the temple.¹⁸

Articulation of Grief

ALL HUMAN BEINGS have a deep-seated need to process grief, death, and loss, or to put it colloquially, "to come to grips with grief." The prevalent mode of doing so in modern Western culture has been through psychological understanding and therapeutic practices. Many in modern society, therefore, are inclined to a psychological interpretation of the ritual mourning for the loss of the temple as described above. There is something to that analysis; anthropologists and cultural historians will point to the formative power of public ceremony to provide symbolic meaning for participants. It bears repeating, however, that premodern cultures did not process these matters psychologically—at least, not in the modern, Western sense of that term—but through various forms of ritual and symbolic performance.

Most likely, Lamentations gave form and procedure to mourning on the part of Judeans, but it did so without the self-consciousness and introspection that comes so "naturally" to modern readers and their analysts. Apparently the poetry (in ceremony) worked so effectively that its performance became an annual ritual. One should not read a negative evaluation into either the term "performance" or "ritual." While moderns think rightly of Lamentations as a form of literature, Judeans in exile understood the poetry as something to be performed. They recited it, sang it, and prayed it. This process brought to mind the continuing influence of a formative event. Furthermore, it helped define Judean corporate identity.

Grief, Complaint, and Hope in God

CLAUS WESTERMANN HAS PROPOSED that the enduring value of the book of Lamentations comes at just the point of its voice in the mourning over and protesting against the tragic events of 586 B.C.:

It is highly significant that there is no attempt anywhere in Lamentations to request restoration. All that is asked for is God's return. God continues to be remembered, and the memory is kept alive in the complaints. They are placed before God in the hope that God's compassion will be aroused.²⁰

Westermann helpfully calls attention to the roles of prayer and memory in forming an expectant people before God. In a public and prayerful way, Judeans were gifted with the opportunity to bring their pain and grief before the same God who had used the Babylonians to judge them and their ancestors. Like the insistent visitor at midnight (Luke 11:5–8) or the widow appealing to the judge (Luke 18:1–8), those who prayed the Lamentations brought the circumstances of their corporate identity before God.

Suffering and Confession of Sin

LAMENTATIONS HOLDS TOGETHER the grief that comes from tragedy and the pain that comes in acknowledging sin and its consequences. When one thinks corporately, the question is not, "How is this event a response to *me*?" but "How is this event a response to *us*?" Both tragedy and judgment are voiced in Lamentations. Those voices speak first about a historical

catastrophe and a judgment that fell on a particular people. Language about "feelings" is in service to this broader perspective. Weeping comes from both catastrophic loss²¹ and the consequences of failure. Even those people who may not have lived in Judah during the tragic events of 586 B.C. are invited to find their place in the community affected by them. Indeed, by taking up the voices offered them in Lamentations, they are asked to learn from them. In this respect Lamentations has a function similar to certain "spirituals" in the African American community, since these songs continue to instruct a community long after the demise of slavery.

Clearing Ground for New Growth

THERE IS A sense in which the liturgical poetry of Lamentations plays a role similar to that of Ecclesiastes in the wisdom tradition. Ecclesiastes reminds readers of the limits of wisdom, of what the wise among humankind still cannot know or explain, of the inequities of life and its disappointments. To be sure, Ecclesiastes notes the joy that is associated with the Lord; moreover, the conclusion to the book reminds readers that it is best to fear God and keep his commandments, for in the future God will bring every secret matter to judgment. But having said these things, Ecclesiastes is primarily a book about limits and about what does not work. In the service of a greater revelation to come, it clears the ground of obstacles to new growth.

Lamentations similarly takes up the traditions of funeral poetry and prayers of anguish to clear away every vestige of self-righteousness, to close avenues of escape from responsibility for failure, and to drive home the uncomfortable truth that no one is finally exempt from God's searching judgments. To be sure, Lamentations confesses that God's mercies are new every morning (Lam. 3:22–24), but the weight of the poems is to plumb the depths of human anguish and despair and to speak about such experiences to the Lord.²² In the service of a greater revelation to come from God, Lamentations speaks both for and to human suffering.

Lamentations and the New Testament

It is none other than Jesus who provides the primary place for lament in the New Testament. Apart from his practice, lamentation is not common in the New Testament. Jesus wept over Jerusalem as a sign of his grief regarding its unbelief and the consequences to come from it (Luke 19:41–44). In his Gethsemane prayer he sweated and prayed for the cup of suffering to be removed from him, but he finally placed himself in God's hands (22:39–46). This is a posture similar to the prayers in Lamentations—similar in the sense that one resolutely casts his or her fate into the hands of a God who seems absent at a moment of great need or perhaps remote and inscrutable.

Jesus' painful death on the cross is punctuated by the cry of dereliction (Mark 15:34): "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This is, moreover, a quotation from a psalm of lament/complaint (Ps. 22:1). Here, it seems, the cry is not only a reflection of Jesus' own suffering but also a testimony to the power of Scripture to define human experience in light of God's self-revelation. A psalm of lament/complaint was a voice offered to those who suffer.

Psalm 22 had been instructive in this regard for centuries. Even David, the king after God's own heart and the psalmist for Israel, experienced judgment and forsakenness, and yet vindication in God's own timing (cf. Ps. 22:25–31). Jesus' passion is a salutary reminder that suffering and grief are endemic to the human race and that he is no exception. Indeed, one element of the atonement accomplished in Jesus' passion is his identification with human suffering. Jesus represents his own in all things, including tragedy and suffering. This is neither to deny or minimize the sacrificial mode of his death, only to note that his representative death is both sacrificial and tragic.²³

Lamentation as a form of prayer is not common in the letters of the New Testament. Paul, for example, enjoins giving thanks in all circumstances with the advice to make petitions known to God (1 Thess. 5:16–18; cf. Rom. 12:12; Phil. 4:4–7). How strongly he may also have petitioned the Lord is hinted at in his thrice-made appeal to God to remove a physical affliction, his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7b–10). He also urged believers to have solidarity with one another, and when appropriate, to "mourn with those who mourn" (Rom. 12:15).

A form of lamentation, although somewhat different from the book of Lamentations, comes in the Revelation of John. After a stunning vision of the heavenly throne room and the scroll with seven seals (Rev. 4:1–5:3), John weeps bitterly because no one is worthy to take the scroll (i.e., the

book of life) and break its seals. This is a powerful depiction of human fallibility and its consequences apart from the intervening and redeeming acts of God. However, the Lamb, standing as though slain, is able to take the scroll and to receive the praise of those in heaven. Lamentations 5 ends with songs of praise to God and to the Lamb who was slain to purchase the lives of the saints. Yet even in their redeemed state, those who were martyred can still ask, "How long?" concerning a fuller cosmic redemption that God has promised (5:10).

Perhaps the reason that the voice of lamentation is muted in the New Testament letters comes with the conviction that in Christ God has demonstrated decisively that he is for his people and that in spite of continuing judgment and refinement through the historical process God will not be thwarted in saving them. A book like Lamentations is a powerful indicator of the travail of human existence and of the way a particular historical experience can shape the perspective of many generations of people. In depicting God as strong in anger and judgment, the book takes its place in an unfolding revelation that points to a God who is more strongly resolute to save. Calvin's comment at the end of his own lectures on Lamentations is still worth pondering:

The faithful, even when they bear their evils and submit to God's scourges, do yet familiarly deposit their complaints in his bosom, and thus unburden themselves.... Let us, then, know, that though the faithful sometimes take this liberty of expostulating with God, they yet do not put off reverence, modesty, submission, or humility.²⁴

Outline of Lamentations

I. The Royal City of Jerusalem Mourns Like a Widow (1:1-22)

- A. The Poet Speaks about Her Destruction (1:1–9a)
- B. She Speaks in Anguish to the Lord (1:9b)
- C. The Poet Speaks Again of Her Suffering (1:10–11a, 17)
- D. Jerusalem Speaks in Mourning (1:11b–16, 18–22)

II. Jerusalem Mourns the Day of the Lord's Anger That Fell on Her (2:1–22)

- A. Destruction Is Described (2:1–10)
- B. The Poet Laments the Destruction of the People (2:11–13)
- C. The Poet Describes the Tragedy of Her Demise (2:14–19)
- D. God Is Addressed About His Work of Judgment (2:20–22)

III. The Poet Speaks of Judgment and Mercy (3:1-66)

- A. God's Judgment Has Fallen on the Poet (3:1–20)
- B. God Is Yet Merciful and Just (3:21–39)
- C. God's People Are Called to Examine Their Way, and God Examines the Poet's Way (3:40–66)

IV. Jerusalem Is Examined Before and After Destruction (4:1–22)

- A. Her Judgment Is Greater Than That of Sodom (4:1–11)
- B. Kings and Others Are Astounded At Jerusalem's Fall (4:12–16)
- C. The Poet Speaks of the People's Suffering and Loss (4:17–20)
- D. God Will Judge the Cruelty of Edom but Grant Jerusalem a Future (4:21–22)

V. The Community Remembers and Asks God to Remember What Happened to Them (5:1–22)

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Text and Commentary on Lamentations

Lamentations 1:1–22

¹How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations! She who was queen among the pr

She who was queen among the provinces has now become a slave.

²Bitterly she weeps at night, tears are upon her cheeks.

Among all her lovers there is none to comfort her.

All her friends have betrayed her; they have become her enemies.

³After affliction and harsh labor, Judah has gone into exile.

She dwells among the nations; she finds no resting place.

All who pursue her have overtaken her in the midst of her distress.

⁴The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to her appointed feasts.

All her gateways are desolate, her priests groan, her maidens grieve, and she is in bitter anguish.

⁵Her foes have become her masters; her enemies are at ease.

The LORD has brought her grief because of her many sins.

Her children have gone into exile, captive before the foe.

⁶All the splendor has departed from the Daughter of Zion.

Her princes are like deer that find no pasture; in weakness they have fled before the pursuer.

⁷In the days of her affliction and wandering

Jerusalem remembers all the treasures that were hers in days of old.

When her people fell into enemy hands, there was no one to help her.

Her enemies looked at her and laughed at her destruction.

⁸Jerusalem has sinned greatly and so has become unclean.

All who honored her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness;

she herself groans and turns away.

⁹Her filthiness clung to her skirts; she did not consider her future.

Her fall was astounding;

there was none to comfort her.

"Look, O LORD, on my affliction, for the enemy has triumphed."

¹⁰The enemy laid hands on all her treasures;

she saw pagan nations enter her sanctuary—

those you had forbidden

to enter your assembly.

¹¹All her people groan as they search for bread;

they barter their treasures for food to keep themselves alive.

"Look, O LORD, and consider, for I am despised."

12"Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?

Look around and see.

Is any suffering like my suffering that was inflicted on me,

that the LORD brought on me in the day of his fierce anger?

13"From on high he sent fire, sent it down into my bones.

He spread a net for my feet and turned me back.

He made me desolate, faint all the day long.

14"My sins have been bound into a yoke; by his hands they were woven together.

They have come upon my neck and the Lord has sapped my strength.

He has handed me over to those I cannot withstand.

15"The Lord has rejected all the warriors in my midst;

he has summoned an army against me to crush my young men.

In his winepress the Lord has trampled the Virgin Daughter of Judah.

¹⁶"This is why I weep and my eyes overflow with tears.

No one is near to comfort me, no one to restore my spirit.

My children are destitute because the enemy has prevailed."

¹⁷Zion stretches out her hands, but there is no one to comfort her.

The LORD has decreed for Jacob that his neighbors become his foes; Jerusalem has become

an unclean thing among them. ¹⁸"The LORD is righteous, vet I rebelled against his command. Listen, all you peoples; look upon my suffering. My young men and maidens have gone into exile. ¹⁹"I called to my allies but they betrayed me. My priests and my elders perished in the city while they searched for food to keep themselves alive. ²⁰"See, O LORD, how distressed I am! I am in torment within, and in my heart I am disturbed, for I have been most rebellious. Outside, the sword bereaves; inside, there is only death. ²¹"People have heard my groaning, but there is no one to comfort me. All my enemies have heard of my distress; they rejoice at what you have done. May you bring the day you have announced so they may become like me. ²²"Let all their wickedness come before you; deal with them as you have dealt with me because of all my sins. My groans are many and my heart is faint."

Original Meaning

As NOTED IN the introduction, this chapter is an acrostic. Each verse begins with a word whose initial letter follows the twenty-two-letter sequence of the Hebrew alphabet. The first word in verse 1, 'eka ("How"), begins with aleph. As the initial word in the book, 'eka is also the traditional name of the book for Hebrew-speaking people.

More than one voice speaks in chapter 1. The poet (the author's voice) begins, and it is complemented by that of personified Jerusalem. When the chapter is read as a unit, the "back and forth" of the two voices mutually reinforces the tragic dilemma of Jerusalem. Possibly the two voices offer a clue to the performance of the poetry among the survivors of Jerusalem's downfall. A poetic recital would give the opportunity not only to descriptive language—that is, that of the poet—but also that of the aggrieved herself, ravaged Jerusalem. The two voices are arranged as follows:

- A. Verses 1–9a are the voice of the poet.
- B. A quotation is attributed to personified Jerusalem in verse 9b.
- C. Verses 10–11a are the voice of the poet.
- D. An extended quotation is attributed to personified Jerusalem in verses 11b–16.
- E. Verse 17 is the voice of the poet.
- F. An extended quotation is attributed to personified Jerusalem in verses 18–22.

Verse 1 indicates the theme of the chapter; it depicts the noble city of Jerusalem in the mourning position of a widow. Not only is she described, but she will speak. The imagery for the city is drawn from three cultural traditions: (1) cities described as female, (2) the funeral tradition of public mourning, and (3) a tradition of using uncleanness and nakedness as metaphors for sinful behavior.

The imagery for Jerusalem, personified and otherwise, runs throughout the chapter. She is a widow, once a noble woman and now a slave (1:1). The NIV rendering in verse 1, "she who was queen," translates the Hebrew noun *s'ara*, which indicates nobility or royalty but does not necessarily refer to a queen. It is the word used for the name of Abraham's wife, Sarah.

In verse 2 s'ara is forsaken by her "lovers." The term has a sexual overtone when used in a similar context by the prophets (e.g., Jer. 2:25b; Ezek. 16:36; Hos. 2:1–13), where it refers either to other gods pursued illicitly or to stronger neighbors with whom Israel or Judah sought to ingratiate themselves. The city's name is actually used for the first time in verse 4, where she is called "Zion" (also in 1:17). Elsewhere the city is named as "Daughter [of] Zion" (1:6), "Jerusalem" (1:7, 8, 17), and "Virgin Daughter of Judah" (1:15). Because of her sinfulness, the Lord has judged her, and her children have gone into exile (1:5; cf. 1:16, 18). Among her children are named "priests" (1:4, 19), "maidens" (1:4, 18), "people" (1:7, 11), and "young men" (1:15, 18).

The feminine personification runs throughout the chapter, with one exception. In 1:17 the lament is that the "LORD has decreed for Jacob that *his* neighbors become his foes." Here the name of the ancestor, which in previous years had sometimes been used for the northern kingdom,² serves to personify the nation of Judah and its capital as a covenant partner gone bad. Otherwise, the female imagery extends remarkably even to Judah in verse 3.³ Jerusalem is the metaphorical daughter/princess in the Lord's realm and/or the daughter of Judah (i.e., the name of the state).

The language of chapter 1 refers to the sinfulness of Judah and to a resulting sorrow and suffering. These things are related to one another; sinfulness has led to judgment and suffering. Their link is expressed succinctly in 1:5, "the LORD has brought her [i.e., Zion] grief because of her many sins" (cf. 1:8, 14, 18, 20, 22). The emphasis falls, however, on the grief, the suffering, and the pitiful nature of the city. She "weeps" (1:1–2, 16) and "groans" (1:8, 21–22), and is "in bitter anguish" (1:4) and "distress" (1:20–21). Nothing here points to the relief of the city's woes.

The ongoing nature of the city's suffering is underscored by the fivefold repetition of the phrase, "there is [was] none [no one] to comfort her" (Lam. 1:2, 9, 16, 17, 21), and the concluding comment of the chapter that her "heart is faint." In the comment that "her friends have betrayed her" (1:2), the city takes up a familiar theme from the psalms of lament/complaint (Ps. 38:11; 88:8). The chapter falls short of claiming that God has betrayed the city, but it seems clear that the experience of divine judgment has shattered the emotions of the poem's speakers.

The voice of the poet depicts Jerusalem in the posture of "remembering" her days of affliction (Lam. 1:7). This posture of remembering or bringing to mind again captures much of the reason for the book of Lamentations as a whole. What is depicted for Jerusalem is actually what the readers (or performers) do when reciting the poem.

In verse 16 Jerusalem weeps, for there is no one to comfort her. This is certainly true with respect to the poems of the book. Apart from the marvelous affirmation in 3:22–24, the tenor of the poems is almost unrelieved in its anguish. One gets only a hint of the other side of judgment in 4:21–22, which envisions judgment on the ravagers of Jerusalem and an end to the exile of Judah and Jerusalem. The same term "comfort" (*nḥm*), however, is used in Isaiah 40:1 in the imperative form as a command to "comfort" Jerusalem, since her anguish will come to an end and because she has paid double for her sins. Possibly there is a scriptural "echo" at work in Isaiah 40:1–2, whereby the cry of Jerusalem in Lamentations is taken up in the prophetic call to comfort the bereaved city.

In verse 22 Jerusalem asks that the evil done to her by her enemies be brought before God so that he can deal with them. An answer to this sentiment also lies largely outside the book. In texts like Obadiah and Isaiah 47 readers again may get an intertextual echo of Lamentations and the desire for vindication.

Bridging Contexts

AN INTERPRETER MAY EXTRACT certain "themes" from Lamentations 1 and then seek to apply them to a setting in ministry today. That exercise would be unhelpful without more consideration of how chapter 1 says what it says. Put another way, there is more to the text than the simple extrapolation of anguish as a result of an ancient tragedy. How "it says what it says" is a primary clue to its meaning for earlier readers, and with proper attention to detail and context, the "how" element can instruct modern readers as well.

(1) The female language points to a familial and corporate depiction of the capital city. By familial is meant the metaphor of membership in God's family. As the royal "daughter," she is a member of Yahweh's family and an intimate covenant partner with him. Jerusalem is also the political and cultural center of Judah. Reference to her is tantamount to a corporate

reference to Judah. In that sense, to mention Jerusalem is *pars pro toto* (a part representing the whole). Her failures, therefore, are failures against a family identity and responsibility. Her shame reflects negatively on her failure to maintain a proper family identity and obedience to its standards of behavior.

- (2) Zion laments with respect to her fall from grace and to her anguish. Her mourning reflects in almost ritual fashion a pattern of funeral lament. Rather than first reading this in psychological terms, it is important to read the text as an indication of social status. Daughter Zion has lost her status as virgin princess and as family member. At certain levels of relationship, she has died. Deadly judgment and public shame are mixed together. Her humiliation reflects also the shame of rejection by God and that of violation by her (and finally God's) enemies. In this case, the shame and anguish are heightened because her enemies have laughed at or celebrated her downfall. As is common with the laments/complaints of the Psalter, the celebrations and taunts of the enemy are particularly bitter to take.⁵
- (3) Zion brings her lament and anguish directly to God. It is a dynamic worthy of careful attention. God has brought the shame and humiliation on her, but he is also the One to whom she turns in lamentation. It is almost as if she reminds God that her humiliation also means his loss as well. Her ridicule could become his as well. She can deny neither her failure nor her neediness. Her neediness is something that only God can fully grasp and only God can fully heal. One function of her lamentation is to give voice to her failures, so that God will recognize in her voice an indication of confession and an appeal for mercy.

It is important to remember that the "she" in this chapter is a corporate reference. Personified Zion is the people. Here we have finally an ecclesiology. God judges his people through their sin and suffering, and they offer their pain to the Lord.

Contemporary Significance

IN THE SUMMER OF 1999 John F. Kennedy Jr. died in a tragic airplane crash. Subsequent investigation concluded that he had likely miscalculated his navigational skills for night-time flight. He, his wife, and her sister were killed in the single plane crash. For American readers, JFK Jr. was close to

royalty. With regard to his tragic death, one headline read: "The End of Camelot." Adding to the grief was the fate of his father, President John Kennedy, himself a victim of tragedy when he was shot and killed in November 1963.

It all seemed so senseless. John Jr. was young, handsome, and rich. The public outpouring of grief, however, was out of proportion to what JFK Jr. had accomplished in life. This comment is not meant to denigrate his life but to illustrate the public persona that JFK Jr. had become. Tragically, an American prince had died. His name and family represented much in the realms of American public life and national identity, and with his demise came an end for some people in their way of perceiving American identity.

The demise of Jerusalem brought with it the end of certain ways of perceiving a relationship with the Lord. How difficult it was (and is!) to grasp meaning in the context of tragedy. Just as some could now ask, "What will life be like without the ideals represented by JFK Jr.?" so God's ancient people asked, "What will life be like without Zion and Judah?" How difficult it is for God's people to see themselves in light of their failures. They first must know that to be God's people is a precious privilege, and then that it is possible for something to threaten that privilege so that they cannot take it for granted. Separation and exclusion from the family of God are painful. Shock is added to the pain with the subsequent recognition that failure has separated people from God in such a way that the rift cannot be healed from Daughter Zion's side any more than it can be healed from the church's side. It can only be healed from God's side.

The subsequent history of Jerusalem demonstrates that God can restore what Judah's failures had corrupted. In Jesus Christ the God who judged Jerusalem and worked through her destruction was himself judged. Christ bore the failures of the world as well as judged them. The poetry of Lamentations is one of the most articulate voices for confession of sin and lament over failure. The poems themselves point first to the consequences of failure; as tragedy they loom larger than life and seemingly out of proportion to the failure. But most important, they are directed to the only One who can hear them fully and adequately respond.

Lamentations 2:1–22

¹How the Lord has covered the Daughter of Zion with the cloud of his anger! He has hurled down the splendor of Israel from heaven to earth: he has not remembered his footstool in the day of his anger. ²Without pity the Lord has swallowed up all the dwellings of Jacob; in his wrath he has torn down the strongholds of the Daughter of Judah. He has brought her kingdom and its princes down to the ground in dishonor. ³In fierce anger he has cut off every horn of Israel. He has withdrawn his right hand at the approach of the enemy. He has burned in Jacob like a flaming fire that consumes everything around it. ⁴Like an enemy he has strung his bow; his right hand is ready. Like a foe he has slain all who were pleasing to the eye; he has poured out his wrath like fire on the tent of the Daughter of Zion. ⁵The Lord is like an enemy; he has swallowed up Israel. He has swallowed up all her palaces and destroyed her strongholds. He has multiplied mourning and lamentation for the Daughter of Judah.

⁶He has laid waste his dwelling like a garden;

he has destroyed his place of meeting.

The LORD has made Zion forget her appointed feasts and her Sabbaths;

in his fierce anger he has spurned both king and priest.

⁷The Lord has rejected his altar and abandoned his sanctuary.

He has handed over to the enemy the walls of her palaces;

they have raised a shout in the house of the LORD

as on the day of an appointed feast.

⁸The LORD determined to tear down the wall around the Daughter of Zion.

He stretched out a measuring line and did not withhold his hand from destroying.

He made ramparts and walls lament; together they wasted away.

⁹Her gates have sunk into the ground; their bars he has broken and destroyed.

Her king and her princes are exiled among the nations,

the law is no more,

and her prophets no longer find visions from the LORD.

¹⁰The elders of the Daughter of Zion sit on the ground in silence;

they have sprinkled dust on their heads and put on sackcloth.

The young women of Jerusalem have bowed their heads to the ground.

¹¹My eyes fail from weeping,

I am in torment within, my heart is poured out on the ground because my people are destroyed, because children and infants faint in the streets of the city.

12They say to their mothers,
"Where is bread and wine?"
as they faint like wounded men
in the streets of the city,
as their lives ebb away
in their mothers' arms.

13What can I say for you?
With what can I compare you,
O Daughter of Jerusalem?

O Daughter of Jerusalem? To what can I liken you,

that I may comfort you, O Virgin Daughter of Zion?

Your wound is as deep as the sea.

Who can heal you?

¹⁴The visions of your prophets were false and worthless;

they did not expose your sin to ward off your captivity.

The oracles they gave you were false and misleading.

¹⁵All who pass your way clap their hands at you;

they scoff and shake their heads at the Daughter of Jerusalem:

"Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth?"

¹⁶All your enemies open their mouths wide against you;

they scoff and gnash their teeth and say, "We have swallowed her up. This is the day we have waited for; we have lived to see it."

17The LORD has done what he planned;

he has fulfilled his word,

which he decreed long ago.

He has overthrown you without pity,

he has let the enemy gloat over you,

he has exalted the horn of your foes.

¹⁸The hearts of the people

cry out to the Lord.

O wall of the Daughter of Zion,

let your tears flow like a river

day and night;

give yourself no relief,

your eyes no rest.

¹⁹Arise, cry out in the night, as the watches of the night begin;

pour out your heart like water

in the presence of the Lord.

Lift up your hands to him

for the lives of your children,

who faint from hunger

at the head of every street.

²⁰"Look, O LORD, and consider:

Whom have you ever treated like this?

Should women eat their offspring,

the children they have cared for?

Should priest and prophet be killed

in the sanctuary of the Lord?

²¹"Young and old lie together

in the dust of the streets;

my young men and maidens

have fallen by the sword.

You have slain them in the day of your

anger;

you have slaughtered them without pity.

²²"As you summon to a feast day,

so you summoned against me terrors on every side. In the day of the LORD's anger no one escaped or survived; those I cared for and reared, my enemy has destroyed."

Original Meaning

CHAPTER 2 CONTINUES the mournful tone of the previous chapter. The poet again frequently refers to Jerusalem as "Daughter," and the pronoun "her" is used throughout to designate things that belong to or are associated with the city. Covenant terms such as *Jacob* and *Israel* also occur (2:1–3) to refer to those whom God has judged. Each of these terms emphasizes that the city, the state, and their inhabitants were and are members of God's people.

Careful examination of chapter 2 reveals several changes in the speaker's form of address. Verses 1–10 describe, in the third person, the suffering and anguish of the city through what God has done to them. God has covered the city with "the cloud of his anger" (2:1); he has "burned in Jacob like a flaming fire" (2:3; cf. 2:5); God has "handed over to the enemy the walls of her palaces" (2:7); and so on. Verses 9–10 describe Jerusalem in her pathetic state.

In verse 11 the poet uses the first-person "I" to describe his weeping and torment with respect to the awful condition of "my people." This is a most interesting verse, since the pattern from chapter 1 suggests that the first-person speech belongs to that of personified Jerusalem. Indeed, some commentators take it that way. However, the first person of 2:13 is that of the poet addressing Jerusalem, and it seems best overall to take 2:11 as also the voice of the poet. The alternation between description and first-person lament gives poignancy to the circumstances of Jerusalem's humiliation.

First-person references come also in verses 13 and 22. The former is the voice of the poet addressing Jerusalem, but verses 20–22 are perhaps better taken as the voice of Jerusalem. Verse 22 refers to those whom the speaker has cared for and raised—verbs associated with child-rearing. Since Jerusalem is frequently personified as a mother, it seems best to see her as the final speaker of chapter 2. In fact, verses 18–19 seem to address the

wall(s) of Jerusalem with the urge to cry out. If correct—and verse 18 is textually difficult—this call to the wall(s) of Jerusalem is an example of metonymy, a literary device whereby something is represented or personified by a constituent part.

We may therefore set out the chapter's voices as follows:

- A. Verses 1–10 are the poet's description of Jerusalem's anguish and humiliation.
- B. Verses 11–13 are the poet's first-person response to Jerusalem's wretchedness.
- C. Verses 14–17 are again the poet's description of Jerusalem.
- D. Verses 18–19 are a call to Jerusalem's walls to cry out to God.
- E. Verses 20–22 are addressed to God by Jerusalem (perhaps more specifically her "walls"; cf. v. 18).

Both the city (2:13–19) and God (2:20–21) are addressed directly. These are second-person references ("you ... your"). The effect overall of this chapter is to move beyond a surface description to give a more nuanced and personal portrait of those judged and bereaved and to ask God about the rightness of the devastation.

The great distinction of Zion's calling is reflected in Lam. 2:1. She is the "splendor" (*tip'eret*) of Israel. This word can be used of an ornament or jewel. In Isaiah 60:7 God describes the temple as "my glorious house" (*bet tip'arti*). In Psalm 99:5 the ark of the covenant is described as God's "footstool," a term also used in in Lam. 2:1 in parallel with Israel's splendor. The city was "the perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth" (2:15; cf. Ps. 48:2), until it came crashing down.

In 2:3 the poet laments the fact that God has "cut off every horn of Israel." The term *horn* can be used as a metaphor for strength or honor, though it can also refer to the upraised corner or protrusions at the ends of a sacrificial altar (Ex. 29:12; Lev. 4:7; Ps. 118:27). It was customary in Israel that those who "grasped the horns of the altar" had asylum and would not be slain (cf. 1 Kings 1:49–53). Thus the comment that God has cut off every horn in Israel can mean that God has destroyed the pride and nobility of the

people and/or that God has removed any means of seeking asylum from the judgment fallen on Jerusalem and Judah.

God is so angry with Jerusalem that he is destroying "his" things that are within her. God has "laid waste his dwelling" and "destroyed his place of meeting" (Lam. 2:6). Verse 7 elaborates on this matter: God has "rejected his altar and abandoned his sanctuary." The presence of the sacred temple in the midst of Jerusalem was no guarantee of God's benevolence or protection. The so-called "temple sermon" of Jeremiah made this view quite clear (Jer. 7 and 26). Even parts of the city are personified to underscore the horror of what has befallen God's jewel. The walls of the city lament and weep over their destruction (Lam. 2:8, 18).

Judgment is unsparing on those leaders who should have led the people in a different direction. The king is rejected and exiled (2:6, 9); the visionary task of the prophets failed them and their people (2:9, 14, 20). Priests are spurned, and now Torah is gone (2:6, 9, 20).

God used the enemy to judge his people and his city. In remarkably pointed and anguished language, the poet asks God whether he has ever treated anyone else like this (2:20). It is as if God has become the enemy by using the enemy.

Bridging Contexts

THE LANGUAGE OF JUDGMENT and destruction in Lamentations is almost a mirror image, a tragic reversal, of the language of the Zion psalms. Those psalms celebrate the greatness of Jerusalem as an agent of God's election and as the secure home of the faithful. A refrain from Psalm 46 says, "The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress" (46:7, 11; cf. 46:1). God is in the midst of the holy city; she shall not be moved (46:5). In the midst of the temple precincts, a worshiper ponders God's steadfast love (48:9). Visitors are encouraged to walk around the ramparts of Jerusalem in order to tell the next generation that "this is God" (48:12–14). But now the security of the city of God has been rolled away by God himself, who has aided Jerusalem's enemies in destroying the city.

The function of this mirror image is to critique a theology of election as privilege and to underscore the necessity of responsibility. Here is a hermeneutical clue for one way to read the book of Lamentations, broadly

speaking, and more particularly, to appropriate Lamentations 2. As with the harsh words of Jeremiah 7, Lamentations confesses that one cannot assume God will protect his own at all cost. No one can stand on holy ground and assert that nothing will overcome it/them. The fall of the city in 586 B.C. is proof of that. Chapter 2 portrays the royal city of God as destitute because of her failures.

Within the language of pain and despair are references to familiar failures. The leadership of God's people has failed miserably to educate and to serve the people responsibly. Here is a theme with wide scriptural endorsement—one that is of paramount concern in any age. It is important to note, however, that with all the language of failure and even accusatory language toward God, there is no suggestion that God has brought into being a turn of events incompatible with his will.

Certainly it is also important to note that modern readers should not universalize from the historical experience of 586 B.C. and the poetry of despair it produced. Not every situation of despair, whether of a group of people or an individual, is God's judging hand. Moreover, the almost defiant tone one picks up among the laments can be a spur to resist attempts to be defined solely as victims seeking pity. Defining oneself or one's group as victims with trampled rights can be both accurate and proper, but such defining can also lead to self-righteousness.

Contemporary Significance

Lamentations 2 teaches both an important historical lesson and one way to pray. The historical lesson, stated succinctly, is that nothing made by human hands can save—not even something as significant as the house of the Lord. Yes, God can give up on an institution founded at his instruction and capable of mediating his grace to generations of worshipers. God can even make war against it. That somber news is tempered by the truth that God can raise the dead and that God's ultimate will to save cannot be thwarted by the historical demise of a central "saving" institution. Congregations, denominations, and nations (including the modern state of Israel) need to hear this. They should hear both tones of the lesson. They are not indispensable to God, but God is gracious nevertheless.

The frankness of the language in Lamentations should persuade people that God is open to their real feelings and their honest reactions to tragedy. There is no "answer" in the immediacy of overwhelming tragedy, and one's prayers ought to reflect that. The great miracle of the gospel is that the One to whom despair and bitterness are directed is the One whose only Son suffered the travail of the cross. God, who strove against Jerusalem and Judah, also engaged the principalities and powers to gain an eternal victory for his people.

Yes! All things work together for good to those who love God and who are called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28). His purpose is to conform us to the image of his Son. That means quite a bit of chiseling and disciplining for us. Not everything is good, but things that happen work toward the good purpose of our incorporation into Christ.

Lamentations 3:1–66

- ¹I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of his wrath.
- ²He has driven me away and made me walk

in darkness rather than light;

- ³indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long.
- ⁴He has made my skin and my flesh grow old

and has broken my bones.

- ⁵He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship.
- ⁶He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead.
- ⁷He has walled me in so I cannot escape; he has weighed me down with chains.
- ⁸Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer.
- ⁹He has barred my way with blocks of stone;

he has made my paths crooked.

- ¹⁰Like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in hiding,
- ¹¹he dragged me from the path and mangled me and left me without help.
- ¹²He drew his bow and made me the target for his arrows.
- ¹³He pierced my heart with arrows from his quiver.
- ¹⁴I became the laughingstock of all my people;

they mock me in song all day long.

¹⁵He has filled me with bitter herbs and sated me with gall.

¹⁶He has broken my teeth with gravel; he has trampled me in the dust.

¹⁷I have been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what prosperity is.

¹⁸So I say, "My splendor is gone and all that I had hoped from the LORD."

¹⁹I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall.

²⁰I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me.

²¹Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:

²²Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.

²³They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

²⁴I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him."

²⁵The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him,

to the one who seeks him;

²⁶it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.

²⁷It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young.

²⁸Let him sit alone in silence, for the LORD has laid it on him.

²⁹Let him bury his face in the dust—there may yet be hope.

- ³⁰Let him offer his cheek to one who would strike him, and let him be filled with disgrace.
- ³¹For men are not cast off by the Lord forever.
- 32Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love.
- ³³For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men.
- ³⁴To crush underfoot all prisoners in the land,
- 35to deny a man his rights before the Most High,
- ³⁶to deprive a man of justice would not the Lord see such things?
- ³⁷Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it?
- 38 Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?
- ³⁹Why should any living man complain when punished for his sins?
- ⁴⁰Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD.
- ⁴¹Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven, and say:
- 42"We have sinned and rebelled and you have not forgiven.
- 43"You have covered yourself with anger and pursued us; you have slain without pity.
- ⁴⁴You have covered yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can get through.
- ⁴⁵You have made us scum and refuse among the nations.

- 46"All our enemies have opened their mouths wide against us.
- ⁴⁷We have suffered terror and pitfalls, ruin and destruction."
- ⁴⁸Streams of tears flow from my eyes because my people are destroyed.
- ⁴⁹My eyes will flow unceasingly, without relief,
- ⁵⁰until the LORD looks down from heaven and sees.
- ⁵¹What I see brings grief to my soul because of all the women of my city.
- 52Those who were my enemies without cause

hunted me like a bird.

- 53They tried to end my life in a pit and threw stones at me;
- 54the waters closed over my head, and I thought I was about to be cut off.
- ⁵⁵I called on your name, O LORD, from the depths of the pit.
- ⁵⁶You heard my plea: "Do not close your ears

to my cry for relief."

- ⁵⁷You came near when I called you, and you said, "Do not fear."
- ⁵⁸O Lord, you took up my case; you redeemed my life.
- ⁵⁹You have seen, O LORD, the wrong done to me.

Uphold my cause!

⁶⁰You have seen the depth of their vengeance, all their plots against me.

- ⁶¹O LORD, you have heard their insults, all their plots against me—
- ⁶²what my enemies whisper and mutter against me all day long.
- ⁶³Look at them! Sitting or standing, they mock me in their songs.
- ⁶⁴Pay them back what they deserve, O LORD,

for what their hands have done.

- ⁶⁵Put a veil over their hearts, and may your curse be on them!
- ⁶⁶Pursue them in anger and destroy them from under the heavens of the LORD.

Original Meaning

CHAPTER 3 EXPANDS on the acrostic pattern of the first two chapters. Instead of a chapter of twenty-two verses, where the initial word in each verse follows the sequence of letters in the Hebrew alphabet, this chapter has sixty-six verses, compiled of twenty-two stanzas, where the stanzas follow the sequence of the Hebrew alphabet. Thus each stanza has three verses, and the initial word of each verse in a stanza begins with the same letter of the alphabet.

Chapter 3 is dominated by first-person references, the language of "I" and "we." This raises the question of authorship in a way the previous two chapters do not. The emphasis of the previous two chapters on the tragic fate of Jerusalem is in the background of chapter 3; front and center is the travail of an individual. Some scholars have taken a cue from this chapter and seen a reference to Jeremiah in the first-person voice. Although possible, most scholars have not found that view convincing. With respect to this individual, there is much language about judgment and the need for repentance that sets his voice apart from that of Jeremiah. In any case, chapter 3 has several of the constituent elements of a lament/complaint so well known from the book of Psalms.²

It is worth asking whether in chapter 3 we as readers are dealing with an individual voice in the fully modern sense of that term (i.e., an individual

whose suffering and experience is provided in autobiographical form), or whether the "I" is the poet's voice in service to the larger community of readers and those who pray the Lamentations. The balance of probability favors the latter. This view does not deny that the suffering voiced in chapter 3 is real; it assumes that the suffering is real and not imagined or choreographed, but it understands that the presentation of the suffering is paradigmatic and that the voice of suffering invites those who hear and read to make it their voice. Put another way, the individual voice of chapter 3, which includes "we" and "our," speaks in order to provide a voice for the suffering members of his community. The first generations of readers would understand the formulaic language of chapter 3 (by way of the laments in the Psalter) to be paradigmatic of the poet's time and generation.

The "I" of chapter 3 is likely the poet of the book. He has seen the destruction of the city and its people, and the language of pain and suffering is filtered through both self-reference and shared experience ("we" and "our"). The language of individual travail is also reminiscent of Job,³ whose "speeches" are much like psalms of individual lament/complaint, especially in the description of his sufferings, in the recounting of the machinations of his "friends," and in his appeal to God for deliverance. Likewise, the affirmation of God's benevolent faithfulness is derived from the central confessions of the Old Testament (see below).

The poet first sees God as the source of trouble, who has turned his rod and hand against the poet (3:1–3). God has besieged and walled him in (3:4–9), as if the fate of the city and the poet are the same. God is a lion or bear, or more menacingly, an archer taking aim at the poet (3:10–12).

In slightly different language the enemies of Zion have condemned and hunted the poet (3:46–54). They plot, insult, and mock him (3:58–63). He recapitulates in his person the suffering endured by the city and its inhabitants. Because his experience is shared by his contemporaries, it is relatively easy to follow the shift in the language from "I" to "we."

As noted above, the terminology of what is essentially an individual lament abounds in scriptural echoes. Darkness is a place of judgment and anguish (3:2, 6).⁴ Barring of a way is evidence of judgment (3:9).⁵ Divine judgment is compared to the assaults of lions and bears (3:10)⁶ and arrows (3:12).⁷ The persecution of the enemies is like being hunted or immersed in water (3:52–54).⁸

Memory plays an important role in a lament. Sometimes the poet asks God to remember and sometimes he himself remembers or recalls the previous deeds of the Lord. Such is the case in 3:19–24. Both suffering and redemption are part of the poet's experience, and he sets their memories side by side. God is the source not only of judgment but also of deliverance. Since he knows that God is strong to save, he says he has "hope" (3:21, 24). The word in Hebrew is a verb (*yḥl*), which has the sense of waiting with expectancy. This means that the resignation seen elsewhere in Lamentations is tempered by the realization that God, who has struck both Jerusalem and the poet, is the same One who can overturn the shame of public judgment and humiliation.

In 3:22 the "great love" of the Lord renders the Hebrew term *hesed*. While love is not a wrong translation, the term also carries the meaning of kindness and loyalty. Hesed is the kind of act that is not required by civil law but springs from the concerned character of the one who acts. A good place to see its focus is in the saying of Hosea 6:6, that God prefers hesed to sacrifice and the *knowledge of God* rather than burnt offerings. Hesed and knowledge of God are paired together in the poetic couplet, and both are contrasted with ritual acts that, while good and proper, must proceed from something deeper and more fundamental than a sense of obligation. Stated differently, sacrifice is a requirement of the Torah and therefore good and proper in context, but hesed is something that can be freely given but not defined by requirements.

Closely related to the term <u>hesed</u> is that of compassion(s)—raḥamim in the Hebrew of 3:22. The best analogy is that of parental concern, for in the singular reḥem can mean womb. Finally, the poet confesses that God is great in faithfulness (*muna; 3:23). One finds these three terms in the great self-definition that God offers of himself to Moses in Exodus 34:6–7:

The LORD, The LORD, the compassionate [raḥum]¹² and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love [ḥesed] and faithfulness [*met],¹³ maintaining love [ḥesed] to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children

for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.

One can read the claims of Lamentations about judgment and mercy and see them as the outworking of this great self-definition of God. The corporate judgment that fell on Judah and Jerusalem is like the judgment that falls to the third and fourth generation, since what is likely meant by them is the claim of completeness. To judge the third and fourth generation is to deal with all involved. By contrast, to show mercy and forgiveness to thousands is to claim that mercy and forgiveness abound further than the third and fourth generation of complete retribution.

As with psalms of lament/complaint, the poet speaks of the "pit," which seeks to claim his life (3:53, 55). In the stanzas of 3:52–57, the poet prays like the beginning of Psalm 130: "Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD." The poet then reminds God that he has seen and heard what the enemies have done. His own life is like a judicial case (3:58), where God the Judge should rule in his favor. The chapter, again like some of the psalms of lament/complaint, concludes with the plea of the poet for God to judge the enemies. In this the poet is also reminiscent of Jeremiah, who sought judgment on his tormenters (Jer. 11:20; 15:15; 17:18; 18:19–23; 20:12).

As is sometimes also the case with psalms of lament/complaint, the poet is moved to speak about repentance (Lam. 3:40–45). Significantly, the language is first-person plural: "Let us examine ... let us return ... let us lift." This indicates that the poet's experience is linked with that of his community. They become one before God. It also signifies the function or impact of Lamentations as a whole. The poems move readers to consider their lives in light of God's holiness and his cleansing judgment.

Bridging Contexts

HUMAN SUFFERING AND RESPONSE. If one looks for an overall impression of chapter 3, it is its similarity to the psalms of individual lament/ complaint and to the complaints of Job. These parallels also provide the first indications of how they may be interpreted in modern contexts. Job and Lamentations are fundamentally oriented toward two issues: God's character in the face of human suffering, and the human response to God in

the context of its suffering. Chapter 3 offers several windows on these two issues.

- (1) God was not absent from the travail and tragedy that accompanied the fall of Jerusalem. God was present as Judge, using historical circumstances in the process of judging and refining his people. The enemies, who in stylized language afflicts the poet, are also agents of God's approach to the poet and the poet's lamenting community. "Why should any living man complain when punished for his sins" (3:39)? Correspondingly, repentance is one response that the poet advocates to his contemporaries. It is characterized by self-examination in light of God's holiness and by a return to the Lord and his covenant stipulations. Judgment on the poet's enemies is still an option for God, even if he has used the "enemy" as a means to reach the poet.
- (2) God is also present as someone who loves his wayward people in spite of their sinfulness. There is more than affirmation of divine judgment in this chapter. If this was not also the experience of the poet before God, he could not have written 3:22–24, and he could not have affirmed that "though [God] brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love" (3:32). Note that the poet's affirmation comes at the center of the book, in the midst of the middle chapter. Perhaps this placement is a clue, although a small one, that God's loyalty is ultimately the center of existence for a believer.
- (3) The way into the future and the way back to God remain open. In addition to repentance the poet gives voice to a plea that God will hear his voice and act (3:56). Job-like in his despair and in his persistent seeking of an audience with God, the poet reminds God that he (God) had defended the poet's case and is his Redeemer. Without a full explanation for his pitiful circumstances, the poet clings to God and asks him to remove the injustice done to him. Only someone with a robust confidence in God's ability to hear and act can speak and pray in this fashion.

In a larger canonical context, one can see the circumstances of the poet similarly portrayed in the life of Christ. The paradigmatic Psalm 22, a classical lament/complaint, helped the early church see meaning in Christ's death and resurrection. Much of the poet's experience in Lamentations 3—especially persecution, suffering, and alienation—are also part of Christ's experience. More importantly, he endured them on behalf of those he loved.

Whether receiving the judgment due to sinners or suffering the fate of the unjustly accused, Christ represented it all in his atoning work, just as he had made it part of his own lived experience. The God to whom the poet prayed and to whom the poet wished to return is the God revealed in and through Jesus Christ.

Contemporary Significance

QUEST FOR SPIRITUALITY. It is illuminating to set the language of Lamentations 3 in the context of the modern quest for (in some cases almost an obsession with) spirituality. We must distinguish carefully between interest in a subject and the particular content or truthfulness of the subject material. There can be no doubt about the rising interest in spirituality in North America, just as there can be no doubt that for many people the topic has been loosened from any connection with a church (i.e., group or corporate identity) or historic form of theology. A recent headline in a secular magazine read "God Dethroned." The point of the piece was that the quest for a personal spirituality and religious experience in the Western world is increasingly being pursued apart from the traditional means of Christian grace.

In a recent phone conversation a pastor friend told me of a conference she was organizing for her congregation around the theme *The People of God*. A steering committee at the church was eager to explore several issues related to the practice of spirituality in daily life. One committee member reported that his neighbor would be a good person to make a presentation about modern spirituality. When the pastor inquired a bit about the neighbor, she discovered that it was the neighbor's intense interest in spirituality that had impressed the congregation member, even though he didn't know whether the neighbor was a Christian or not.

Chapter 3 of Lamentations comes in the context of historical experience and inherited revelation. It has several marks of authentic spirituality. The language of the text is thoroughly imbued with terms and concepts found elsewhere in the Old Testament. There is no doubt in the poet's mind that he is dealing with the living God, who revealed himself to his ancestors and acted in judgment in the destruction of Jerusalem. The questions for the

poet are how to make sense of his tragic circumstances and how to approach his future in relationship to this God.

The poet looks at his circumstances squarely and sees them as God's approach to him and to his community. In response, the poet sees the circumstances as indications of a way forward in his spirituality. (1) He sees the tragedy of Jerusalem's fall as a revelation of the Lord, not as the entry of a new and foreign deity into his life or the stubborn arrival of an irrational mystery. Judgment is consistent with the character of God revealed in Torah, prophecy, and the psalms.

- (2) He learns that prayer and confession directed toward God bring him into fellowship with God.
- (3) He finds that repentance is more than a concept, that it is a tangible way of relating to God. Repentance is not a magical elixir but a series of steps taken toward God in obedience to his will. For many people, failure to acknowledge the truth about God is less an intellectual matter and more a moral matter; and more particularly a matter of the will. That is why confession and repentance are integral to authentic spirituality.
- (4) He seeks God for deliverance and healing. He is able to see that his circumstances are the occasion for fresh prayers and newfound vows.
- (5) It probably never occurs to him that his spirituality can be a private matter. His confession that God is faithful also includes affirmation that "we" are not consumed. His call to repentance offers steps for "us" to return to the Lord.
- (6) For the poet "waiting" on the Lord includes the practices of prayer and repentance and does not assume that waiting is merely marking time.

Obedience. One of the mysterious sayings in the New Testament is the affirmation in Hebrews 5:8 that Jesus learned obedience through things suffered. Clearly the obedience that Jesus embraced did not emerge from his earlier sinfulness. Instead, his incarnation and the life he lived gave shape to a kind of spirituality he shared with his followers. The poet of Lamentations 3 learns a kind of obedience from the things he has suffered. He gives voice to them because his experience is meant to be shared. Christian spirituality has a goal: to be conformed to the image of Christ. By the incarnation of his Son, God has given us a Savior, who was fashioned to draw us to himself. Suffering and travail can be means to that end, not in a

masochistic or pain-denying way, but in ways that the poet of Lamentations is just beginning to grasp.

Lamentations 4:1–22

¹How the gold has lost its luster, the fine gold become dull! The sacred gems are scattered at the head of every street. ²How the precious sons of Zion, once worth their weight in gold, are now considered as pots of clay, the work of a potter's hands! ³Even jackals offer their breasts to nurse their young, but my people have become heartless like ostriches in the desert. ⁴Because of thirst the infant's tongue sticks to the roof of its mouth: the children beg for bread, but no one gives it to them. ⁵Those who once ate delicacies are destitute in the streets. Those nurtured in purple now lie on ash heaps. ⁶The punishment of my people is greater than that of Sodom, which was overthrown in a moment without a hand turned to help her. ⁷Their princes were brighter than snow and whiter than milk, their bodies more ruddy than rubies, their appearance like sapphires. ⁸But now they are blacker than soot; they are not recognized in the streets. Their skin has shriveled on their bones; it has become as dry as a stick. ⁹Those killed by the sword are better off than those who die of famine; racked with hunger, they waste away for lack of food from the field.

¹⁰With their own hands compassionate women

have cooked their own children, who became their food when my people were destroyed.

11 The LORD has given full vent to his wrath;

he has poured out his fierce anger.

He kindled a fire in Zion

that consumed her foundations.

¹²The kings of the earth did not believe, nor did any of the world's people, that enemies and foes could enter

the gates of Jerusalem.

13But it happened because of the sins of her prophets

and the iniquities of her priests,

who shed within her the blood of the righteous.

¹⁴Now they grope through the streets like men who are blind.

They are so defiled with blood that no one dares to touch their garments.

15"Go away! You are unclean!" men cry to them.

"Away! Away! Don't touch us!"

When they flee and wander about, people among the nations say,

"They can stay here no longer."

¹⁶The LORD himself has scattered them; he no longer watches over them.

The priests are shown no honor,

the elders no favor.

¹⁷Moreover, our eyes failed, looking in vain for help;

from our towers we watched for a nation that could not save us.

¹⁸Men stalked us at every step, so we could not walk in our streets.

Our end was near, our days were numbered,

for our end had come.

¹⁹Our pursuers were swifter than eagles in the sky;

they chased us over the mountains and lay in wait for us in the desert.

²⁰The LORD's anointed, our very life breath,

was caught in their traps.

We thought that under his shadow we would live among the nations.

²¹Rejoice and be glad, O Daughter of Edom,

you who live in the land of Uz.

But to you also the cup will be passed; you will be drunk and stripped naked.

²²O Daughter of Zion, your punishment will end;

he will not prolong your exile.

But, O Daughter of Edom, he will punish your sin and expose your wickedness.

1

Original Meaning

CHAPTER 4 VARIES the presentation of the city's fall from that given in chapters 1–2 or 3. A dominant motif here is a chronological contrast or what may be called a "then and now" contrast. The poet contrasts the

former splendor of the city and its inhabitants with the pitiful conditions of his own day.

Verses 1–2 set a tone for the poem, where he compares the presiege city and its inhabitants to gold, the most precious metal in the ancient world. The postsiege and destroyed city is dull metal and scattered jewels, and its sons are pots of clay, subject to breaking at any moment.

With verse 3 comes a depressing comparison. The carrion-eating jackal cares enough to suckle its young, but the poet's people are like the ostrich. This is not a self-evident comparison to modern readers. Perhaps the ostrich's habit of burying eggs and leaving them gave it the reputation of being heartless (cf. Job 39:13–16). In any case, the dehumanizing effects of oppression continue their deadly work among a spent people.

One shocking effect of the Babylonian siege was the enormity of the changes that happened to families with children. There was no food for the children to eat (Lam. 4:4), so they had to beg for sustenance. Indeed, since there is nothing for anyone to eat, some mothers even cooked their own children (4:10). Although the comment about cannibalism is made without elaboration, the emotional impact can hardly be overestimated.²

Such dire circumstances give rise to a speculative thought concerning death. The poet suggests that those who died from the sword are better off than those who died from famine (Lam. 4:9). It is not clear whether the poet really believes this is so or whether he states the comparison for its effectiveness in depicting the horror of Zion's fall. One may compare the author of Ecclesiastes, a master of rhetoric in making a point, in his claims that the dead have it better than the living, and that better than either is the one never born (Eccl. 4:1–6). The logic of such a statement is, of course, suicide. But since Ecclesiastes does not advocate suicide elsewhere or opt for it in his own case, presumably he is exaggerating to make a point about life's inequities.

Similarly, the poet of Lamentations underscores the pain and despair of his generation rhetorically by noting how much longer and more painful it is to starve than to die by the sword. Perhaps we should interpret similarly the comment about the punishment on Zion as greater than that for Sodom (Lam. 4:6). Sodom—it should be recalled—was wholly consumed in fire in a way that Zion was not. God's judgment on Sodom was proverbial as an

example of swift and total punishment, and this is the reason for its employment in the poetry of Lamentations 4.3

The poet picks up a strand of teaching about Jerusalem's failure that is given elsewhere in the Old Testament, namely, that the leadership of the people shed "the blood of the righteous" (4:13, i.e., innocent blood). Whether this means by active persecution or by allowing injustice is not stated. One finds this charge against Manasseh in 2 Kings 21:16, against Jehoahaz in Jeremiah 22:17, and against princes and officials in Ezekiel 22:6, 27.4

There is a reflection of the popular "theology of Zion" in Lam. 4:12, a belief that Jerusalem was sacrosanct and that God would not allow the city to fall. By "popular" is meant that it was well-received by the populace and thus a well-known sentiment. We should add immediately that this view was *not* held in such a simplistic formulation by inspired prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, who spoke a word of the Lord against a number of popular (mis)conceptions of their contemporaries. Jeremiah, in particular, railed against a blind belief in the inviolability of the temple area (see Jer. 7; 26). The poet of Lamentations notes (perhaps rhetorically) that foreign kings were surprised at Zion's fall, as if everyone knew of Zion's special status.

Lamentations 4:17 picks up on another theme given in prophetic accounts, namely, that help from another state would not save Zion. Jeremiah notes that the Babylonian siege was temporarily lifted because of an approaching Egyptian army (Jer. 34:21–22; 37:5–11). Hopes for relief, however, quickly died when the siege was reinstated.

The poet speaks movingly of Zedekiah, Zion's reigning monarch at the time of the city's fall (Lam. 4:20). He uses a striking phrase to describe his royal role—that Zedekiah was the very "life breath" of the people. Comparison of this statement with the strong polemic of Jeremiah against Zedekiah is one reason why some scholars conclude that Jeremiah cannot be the author of Lamentations. However one decides that issue, verse 20 reflects poignant appreciation for the royal office ("the LORD's anointed"). The royal messiah (i.e., "anointed one") represented and gave life to the people. Metaphorically his "shadow" provided security for the people like the shadow or wings of the Lord for the righteous (cf. Ruth 2:12; Ps. 17:8; 91:1, 4).

Finally, verses 21–22 refer to an end to Zion's punishment and the beginning of Edom's judgment from the Lord. Apparently, the assistance Edom gave the Babylonians in taking Zion was a particularly bitter pill for Judeans. After all, Judah and Edom were joined by blood. Nothing is said directly about an Edomite role in the fall of Jerusalem, but the vitriolic language of Psalm 137:7; Joel 3:19–21; and Obadiah 10–14 make it clear that Edom had committed treachery.

This oracle-like conclusion to Lamentations 4 has a strong ironic bite to it. Edom is actually called on to rejoice and be glad [in the present] because the cup is about to be passed, and they will be harshly judged in the future. Partaking of a celebratory cup—which turns on its drinker and leads to drunkenness and judgment—is a proverbial motif of judgment throughout the Old Testament. The content of the cup initially tastes good, but it contains the wrath of judgment soon to be dispensed.

The judgment that fell on Zion was severe, but it will have an end (4:22a). In succinct fashion the two parts of this affirmation show the major function of Lamentations. On the one hand, judgment has fallen, and the resulting tragedies are everywhere in evidence. On the other hand, a confession on the part of the people helps prepare the way for the new thing God will do in bringing an end to Jerusalem's bereavement and humiliation.

Bridging Contexts

THEN AND NOW. The "then and now" mode of presentation of chapter 4 is a basis on which to proceed toward a modern appropriation of the text. Jerusalem's demise at the hands of the Babylonians (and Edomites!) came as the result of sweeping historical forces used by the Lord to judge and discipline his people. Assumed in this presentation of great privilege and great fall is Jerusalem's place in the divine economy. It was a marvelous place because God had chosen it for the seat of Davidic rule and the location of the temple, where his name and glory dwelt. Any destruction of human life and limb is tragic, but the fall of Jerusalem is particularly poignant because she is "Daughter ... Zion," God's chosen vehicle.

There is a pattern to be discerned and prayerfully contemplated in the "then and now" motif: The church is an object of God's gracious choice, formed through the hammer and anvil of the historical process and intended

as the spiritual home and sustenance of believers. Comprised of God's people, the church has taken a variety of forms in the unfolding revelation we call history. It has suffered grievously at times, and in the power of the Holy Spirit it has given birth to redemptive miracles. God has granted the church, or parts thereof, more than one angle of vision to see its past and present set before the seat of assessment.

Correspondingly, individual believers will recognize the pattern of tragedy and triumph, a kind of "then and now" too, as part of the Christian life. Christian lives are grounded in God's gracious call and subject to the various fits and turns known as providence.

It is important to note the way this chapter ends. The poet notes that God will not prolong the exile of Daughter Zion. At a time he has determined, Jerusalem and Judah will be reconstituted. It was and remains an ongoing process. For both individuals and the church, the future lies open to God's redeeming grace and his judgment on wickedness.

Contemporary Significance

ACCEPTING RESPONSIBILITY. The New York Times carried an editorial for July 5, 2000, written by Thomas Lynch entitled "A Man's Right to Choose." His first point has to do with the essence of adulthood in modern America, which is to exercise choice among options. He notes that his three sons and daughter can choose their sexual partners and how much to invest in the broader relationship that comes with sexual activity. Mr. Lynch knows that such choices/commitments are not easy, and he hopes (as do all parents) that his children will choose wisely, including the taking of precautions to avoid unwanted pregnancies. Lynch wonders, however—and this is his next point—that since his daughter can legally avail herself of the option to terminate a pregnancy, why cannot also his three sons legally avail themselves of the option to disallow responsibility for an unwanted child. As he puts it:

If the choice as to when one is ready, willing and able to parent is a good thing, wouldn't it be good for my sons as well? And if that choice may be exercised by women after conception, then shouldn't men have the same option: to proclaim, legally and unilaterally, the end of their interest in the tissue or fetus or baby or whatever it is that sex between a man and a woman sometimes produces?

Lynch reminds the reader that Roe versus Wade gave a woman the right to choose, but that once a child is born, the father is forced minimally into eighteen years of fiscal responsibility. He thinks it better if men as well as women can choose whether to be a parent or not, and that the state should not compel men any more than women to be parents.

The point of this quick summary is not to say that Lamentations 4 is an antiabortion, profamily piece, nor is it to vilify Mr. Lynch (with whom this author emphatically disagrees). It is to show how presuppositions about individual freedom and options of withdrawal of responsibility sit so differently beside a text like Lamentations 4, with its heartfelt concern for the inhabitants of Zion who have died or who are suffering, and above all its presupposition that God has placed them in places of moral and spiritual responsibility in which they will be held accountable.

Zion's (then) recent tragedy is set in the context of a history in which God called the city and its inhabitants to exercise their covenant responsibilities, to be a city set on a hill as a light to the nations, and to show forth God's praise. The poet laments the loss of people, great and small, while acknowledging communal responsibility for her demise. Everywhere it is assumed that God's people are called to exercise a moral and spiritual life in the public realm and that there have been and will be consequences to moral choices. This is not just an Old Testament conviction; it is broadly biblical and as relevant today as in the past.

In the twenty-first century it is still the case that there is no evading of responsibility in God's economy, so that it is false and misleading to view life as comprised primarily of morally neutral choices to be made by autonomous people. We have no right to move in and out of social commitments like stock options in building a portfolio.

The past, present, and future alike come under the judging, refining, and transforming work of God. We are called to moral and spiritual accountability. We, as creatures made in the image of God, are much more than "the tissue or fetus or baby or whatever it is that sex between a man

and a woman sometimes produces" (the terminology of Mr. Lynch). All of us have a past as well as a future in which we are held morally and spiritually accountable. There will be harsh and tragic words in the future for those who think that freedom and pleasure are the goals of human existence. By God's grace they can be gifts in due season, but that is a far different matter than the goal of radical autonomy. The latter is a false god and leads ultimately to catastrophe.

God grants joy and peace in the Holy Spirit, but the freedom of his children comes through embracing a gospel of redemption and renewal—redemption from the effects of sin and selfishness, and renewal in the image and likeness of Christ. God will not prolong "your exile," but "wickedness" will be exposed. That was true then, and it will remain so.

Lamentations 5:1–22

- ¹Remember, O LORD, what has happened to us;
 - look, and see our disgrace.
- ²Our inheritance has been turned over to aliens,
 - our homes to foreigners.
- ³We have become orphans and fatherless, our mothers like widows.
- ⁴We must buy the water we drink; our wood can be had only at a price.
- ⁵Those who pursue us are at our heels; we are weary and find no rest.
- ⁶We submitted to Egypt and Assyria to get enough bread.
- ⁷Our fathers sinned and are no more, and we bear their punishment.
- ⁸Slaves rule over us, and there is none to free us from their hands.
- ⁹We get our bread at the risk of our lives because of the sword in the desert.
- ¹⁰Our skin is hot as an oven, feverish from hunger.
- ¹¹Women have been ravished in Zion, and virgins in the towns of Judah.
- ¹²Princes have been hung up by their hands;
 - elders are shown no respect.
- ¹³Young men toil at the millstones; boys stagger under loads of wood.
- ¹⁴The elders are gone from the city gate; the young men have stopped their music.

15 Joy is gone from our hearts;
our dancing has turned to mourning.
16 The crown has fallen from our head.
Woe to us, for we have sinned!
17 Recause of this our hearts are faint.

¹⁷Because of this our hearts are faint, because of these things our eyes grow dim

¹⁸for Mount Zion, which lies desolate, with jackals prowling over it.

¹⁹You, O LORD, reign forever; your throne endures from generation to generation.

²⁰Why do you always forget us? Why do you forsake us so long?

²¹Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may return;

renew our days as of old

²²unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure.

Original Meaning

THE FINAL CHAPTER of Lamentations is a corporate lament, a mournful address to God, seeking his recognition of his people's sufferings and reminding him of the continuing effects of these sufferings on them. The text is not arranged as an acrostic in the ways that the first four chapters are, but the number of verses is twenty-two, the same as chapters 1–2 and 4. Perhaps the use of twenty-two verses is a final reminder that this communal response to the suffering of Judah and Jerusalem moves once more, like the previous chapters, from beginning to end.

The dominant voice in this chapter is first-person plural. There are pleas to God (5:1, 20–21), descriptions of dire circumstances and their ongoing oppressiveness (5:2–18), confession of sin (5:16), and affirmation of God's majesty (5:19). Verse 1 calls on God to remember what has happened to the people, and verse 20 comes back to the matter of what God knows or

remembers by asking: "Why do you always forget us?" Between 5:1 and 5:20, only verse 19 does not describe the people's circumstances. In content there is little new from the previous chapters but much that remains poignant about the fall of Jerusalem and its effects on Judah.

The tone, indeed the very grammar, of the chapter with its challenge for God to remember and its plea for God to restore invites conversation between the people and God. In some ways this tone is a primary function of Lamentations as a poetic collection, but it is especially characteristic of the concluding chapter. By conversation is meant much more than the exchange of pleasantries or of recent news. A corporate call to God typically comes in the context of worship, and the topic of conversation here—the very possibility of an ongoing relationship between Judah and God—is best approached through prayer and confession.

There are formal parallels (the constituent parts) and common concerns with Psalm 44, a corporate lament/complaint. In 44:24 God is asked: "Why do you ... forget our misery and oppression?" In 44:1–8 God is extolled. One function of the psalm's initial praise of God is to remind both God and people that he has been their Protector and Redeemer in the past. In 44:20–22 the people note that they have not "forgotten" God, implying that perhaps God has forgotten them. A few verses later (44:23–24), they utter the plea for God to rouse himself from sleep. We are dealing here with metaphor and rhetoric. Psalm 44 does not, however, understand the devastation on God's people (whatever it was) as the consequence of sinfulness and faithlessness. On the contrary, that devastation comes from the evildoers as a result of the people's attempt to be faithful to God (44:17–18, 22).

The poet of Lamentations 5 offers a catalogue of characters whose lives have been shattered by the loss of Jerusalem. Women were assaulted, princes and elders abused, and men of various ages in calamity (5:11–14). Corporately the joy is gone from the people's hearts (5:15). The voices of the text sound weary, resigned, and accusatory.

One acknowledgment is that it was futile to seek aid from Egypt and Assyria (5:6). This was a familiar prophetic charge that God's people looked too quickly for deliverance from a neighbor, and the poet confirms its truthfulness.

There is no doubt in the mind of the poet that God has rejected and judged his people. But has God irrevocably and utterly rejected them, and is his anger beyond measure and without appeasement? No final answer can come solely from the side of the people, for they are not capable of restoring themselves to God. An answer, nevertheless, is intimated, even though only God can bring it to pass. It is intimated in the confession of God's daily mercy (3:22–24), in the claim that Judah's exile will not be forever (4:22), and in the request for God to restore the people to himself (5:21).

Bridging Contexts

WEARY AND OUTCAST. "With what shall I come before the LORD?" asks the prophet Micah in Micah 6:6. There are occasions when confession of sin and articulations of grief and concern are the order of the day. Lamentations 5 gives a historical voice for one such occasion. It serves as a summary of much of the previous book, yet it can also stand alone as a communal lament to God.

The abiding value of chapter 5 (which is essentially a concluding prayer) is not likely to be found by a modern group trying to match up exactly its problems with those enunciated in the chapter. It is more likely to be discovered through contemplation on the weariness (5:5b) that human failure and fallibility typically produce. It is even more likely to be found when a believing community finds itself not only weary but also feeling outcast, and where there is no longer any joy in the Lord. If there is presence of mind among God's people on such occasions, some will articulate their feelings and find that God seems absent or judgmental. It may take a long time to discover any or all of the reasons why. But those reasons do exist. Furthermore, the language of biblical lamentation may provide just the kind of resources needed for the articulation of pain and the spiritual discernment to push beyond the spiritual malaise.

Another clue to the application of the chapter's teaching is the fact that a number of medieval Hebrew manuscripts repeat 5:21 after 5:22, so that the reading or chanting of the book does not end on a down note. A consequence of this reading is to end the book with a recognition that God

is able to restore a wayward people (or person) and that there is a history to the issue of divine judgment and restoration.

Contemporary Significance

MEMORY. The congregational voices in Lamentations 5 work on several levels, two of which may be held up for special consideration. One common element is memory. With regard to God's memory, when the ancient congregation asks God to remember its decrepit state, it does not literally believe that God has forgotten their circumstances. To remember in this instance means to bring to mind again a matter whose import should induce one to act. That is why the call for God to remember in the prayer is immediately connected with a plea for God to see and take notice. The assumption is that once the circumstances are noted, they will induce action on God's part.

With regard to the people's memory, the shameful and oppressive nature of what happened at the hands of the Babylonians was kept in memory and thus (it was hoped) became instructional for later generations. The circumstances functioned as a teaching device, explaining why Jerusalem had fallen and warning of the consequences. Lamentations functions to keep a sad and oppressive period alive in memory and influence so that it may not get repeated.

Visitors to the concentration-camp complexes at Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland report that plaques have been erected on the rubble of one of the crematoriums. Of all the concentration camps established by the Nazis, Auschwitz seems to evoke the most horror. Each plaque says essentially the same thing, although each is inscribed in a different language. The English plaque reads: "Forever let this place be a cry of despair, a warning to humanity." The complexes at Auschwitz-Birkenau serve a crucial educational role. No visitor can avoid the feeling of evil that pervades the place, even though the camp has not been used in over half a century.

Despair and hope. One cannot visit that site without experiencing despair and warning. In recent years Polish Catholics have placed crosses near a part of the complex as a witness of their Christian faith and as a sign that Christ too shared the pain of the thousands of Jews and other "undesirables" executed in the gas chambers and burned in the

crematoriums. Some Jewish groups have been offended at their witness and have insisted that nothing divert attention from the task of remembering and warning.

Reading the book of Lamentations evokes similar emotions to those expressed on the plaques at Auschwitz. The main reasons are that much of the language of this book is that of despair and that the destruction of Jerusalem had an impact on ancient Jews similar to that of the Holocaust on modern Jews. To be sure, there are clear differences between occasions for the Judean war with Babylon and those for the Second World War, chief among them being Judean responsibility for the disaster in 586 B.C. Judeans of that time brought the tragedy on themselves in ways that European Jews did not bring the Holocaust on themselves. But despair was and remains a common product of both events.

Whatever one makes of the propriety of Polish Catholics erecting crosses at Auschwitz, a Christian interpreter cannot help but read Lamentations in light of the cross and resurrection, since these two teachings are foundational to the gospel. In some ways the destruction of Jerusalem and the downfall of Judah were tantamount to the death of Judah and the people of God. Only a God who raises the dead can speak adequately to that generation.

The book of Lamentations preaches the cross in a historically based typological sense. In doing so, it unmasks the pretense and hypocrisy of humankind in any generation, pushing all who read its despairing poetry to reflect on the meaning and purpose of their own lives. Within the dominant despair of the book are indications that God has spoken a renewing and redeeming Word. In the fullness of time that Word was enfleshed, crucified, and resurrected. Through his Word God is not aloof toward despair, even despair of its own making, but has taken despair into and upon himself through the cross and resurrection of his Son, expending its death-dealing curse and bringing healing and immortality to light.

Calvin's words to introduce the reading of Lamentations are appropriate also as a conclusion to our own reading: "Though nothing in the land appeared but desolation, and the temple being destroyed, the covenant of God appeared as made void, and thus all hope of salvation had been cut off, yet hope still remained, provided the people sought God in true repentance and faith."

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Notes

- 1. For additional details see the discussions of E. Tov, "The Literary History of the Book of Jeremiah in the Light of Its Textual History," in *Empirical Models for Biblical Criticism*, ed. J. Tigay (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 211–37; idem, "Some Sequence Differences Between the MT and LXX and Their Ramifications for the Literary Criticism of the Bible," *JNSL* 13 (1987): 151–60; and W. Holladay, *Jeremiah* (2 vols.; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 2:1–8.
- 2. N. Avigad, "Baruch the Scribe and Jerahmeel the King's Son," *IEJ* 28 (1978): 52–56; idem, "The Seal of Seraiah (Son of) Neriah," *Eretz Israel* 14 (1978): 86–87 [in Hebrew]; J. R. Lundbom, "Baruch, Seraiah, and Expanded Colophons in the Book of Jeremiah," *JSOT* 36 (1986): 89–114; J. Andrew Dearman, "My Servants the Scribes: Composition and Context in Jeremiah 36," *JBL* 109 (1990): 403–21.
- 3. The discovery of fragments of Jeremiah at Qumran have made the textual history of Jeremiah even more intriguing and difficult to reconstruct. Included in the Hebrew fragments are texts in Hebrew that are closer to the Greek versions than the Masoretic Text. See the discussion of E. Tov, "The Jeremiah Scrolls from Cave 4," RevQ 2 1989): 189–206.
- 4. In his commentary W. McKane describes the compilation of the book of Jeremiah as a "rolling corpus" (A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), I–lxxxiii.
- 5. One of the striking things about the book of Jeremiah is the number of doublets and repeated phrases and allusions. This phenomenon seems to reflect a goal of presenting, and even re-presenting, a full measure of Jeremiah's public prophecies. See the analysis of G. H. Parke-Taylor, *The Formation of the Book of Jeremiah: Doublets and Recurring Phrases* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000).
- 6. For sequential readers, a description of Jerusalem's fall (and thus the end of the kingdom of Judah) is given in Jer. 39. Chapter 52 is anticlimactic in several ways. Apparently the account of Judah's fall was attached to the prophet's oracles against other nations as another indication of his prophetic work.
- 7. Associated with the theme of God's lordship over the nations is the announcement initially revealed in Jeremiah's call that God watches over his word to pluck up and to tear down, to build and to plant (1:10). These words and their elaboration run like a thread through various parts of the book.
- 8. S. Mowinckel, *Zur Komposition des Buches Jeremia* (Oslo: Dybwad, 1914). Chapter 2 is an example of a collection of poetic oracles; ch. 36 is an example of biographical prose; and ch. 7 is an example of a prose sermon.
- 9. E. Nicholson, *Preaching to the Exiles: A Study of the Prose Tradition in the Book of Jeremiah* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970); W. Thiel, *Die deuteronomistische Redaktion von Jeremia 1–25* (WMANT 41; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1973); idem, *Die deuteronomistische Redaktion von Jeremia 26–52* (WMANT 52; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981).
- H. Weippert, Die Prosareden des Jeremiabuches (BZAW; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973). The two-volume Hermeneia commentary by Holladay represents this viewpoint.
- 11. The bibliography on Jeremiah's "confessions" is large; see M. S. Smith, *The Laments of Jeremiah and Their Contexts: A Literary and Redactional Study of Jer 11–20* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), and the comments in the commentary on Jer. 11:18–12:17.
- 12. See further A. H. W. Curtis and T. Römer, *The Book of Jeremiah and Its Reception* (Leuven: Leuven Univ. Press, 1997); and A. Siedlecki, "Jeremiah, Book of (Interpretation Through the 19th-Century)," in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. J. H. Hayes (2 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 1:564–70.
- 13. Jeremiah is mentioned in 2 Chron. 35:25 and 36:21, and his oracles influenced a variety of postexilic biblical texts, noncanonical literature, and the New Testament. See Holladay, *Jeremiah* 2:85–93. For more details, see C. Wolff, *Jeremia im Frühjudentum und Urchristentum* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1976).
- 14. One may find introductions to and descriptions of these works in volumes of the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992). See the various entries under "Baruch," "Jeremiah (Additions to)," and "Jeremiah, Epistle of."
- 15. See M. Knowles, Jeremiah in Matthew's Gospel: The Rejected Prophet Motif in Matthean Redaction (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).
- 16. Perusing the catalog of a theological library will amply confirm that reflection on the Trinity has made a remarkable resurgence. Good sources for further thought are: M. Erickson, God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995); T. F. Torrance, The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being in Three Persons (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996); and P. Toon, Our Triune God: A Biblical Portrayal of the Trinity (Wheaton: Victor, 1996).
- 17. Christ as the *scope* of Scripture is a favorite theme of the church fathers. Although some of their exegetical methods appear arbitrary, the substance of their claim is still valid. See the essays on patristic biblical interpretation in P. Blowers, ed., *The Bible in Greek Christian Antiquity* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1997). Three modern biblical scholars whose work presupposes Trinitarian doctrine with a Christological center are: B. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); F. Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); and C. Seitz, *Word Without End: The Old Testament As Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

- 18. For a treatment of the threefold office in both historical and contemporary theology, see G. Wainwright, For Our Salvation: Two Approaches to the Work of Christ (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 99–186. One may interpret Christ as the culmination of prophecy, priesthood, and royalty whether beginning with a historical-critical analysis or typological, intertextual, and even sociological readings.
- 19. There is future hope for Israel in the New Testament (cf. Rom. 11:25–36). I do not think it wise to give priority to a literal reading of Old Testament prophecies concerning the future of Israel when the New Testament does not do so.
- 20. Some examples would be J. Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953); P. E. Hughes, *Interpreting Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976); H. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews Univ. Press, 1983); W. VanGemeren, *The Story of Salvation: The Story of Salvation from Creation to the New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988); idem, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).
- 21. See further, D. L. Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible*, 2d ed. (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1992). His discussions of typology and promise and fulfillment are especially helpful.
- 22. Two excellent discussions of hermeneutics, dispensational and otherwise, are J. S. Feinberg, ed., Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments: Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1988); C. A. Blaising and D. L. Bock, ed., Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church: The Search for Definition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).
- 23. For discussion of a difficult subject, see E. R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (3d ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); more briefly, M. Cogan, "Chronology (Hebrew Bible)," in *ABD*, 1:1005–11; and G. Galil, *The Chronology of the Kings of Israel and Judah* (Leiden: Brill, 1996). Each work takes the scriptural texts seriously in an attempt to present an absolute chronology where possible. The fact that each presents a different chronology in places (and the fact that there are still other competing schemes) urges caution upon the interpreter. For Babylonian and Egyptian dates see D. J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldean Kings* (626–556 B.C.) in the British Museum (London: British Museum, 1956); A. Spalinger, "Egypt and Babylon: A Survey (620–550 BC)," *Studien zur altägyptische Kultur* 5 (1977): 228–44.
- 24. The two-volume commentary on Jeremiah by William Holladay is based on a reconstruction of Jeremiah's career that assumes the thirteenth year of Josiah (ca. 627 B.C.) as the prophet's birth. Holladay provides a full bibliography of others, pro and con, who discuss the date of the prophet's birth and the commencement of his public ministry.
- 25. For a defense of the thirteenth year as the beginning of Jeremiah's prophetic career, assuming a date for his birth ca. 640 B.C. or earlier, see J. R. Lundbom, *The Early Career of the Prophet Jeremiah* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1993). Lundbom proposes that Jeremiah was called, as a teenager, in Josiah's thirteenth year, but that he did not commence his public prophecy until a few years later, prompted by the discovery of the book of the Torah in Josiah's eighteenth year (622 B.C.).
- 26. It is also possible that some of the oracles in Jer. 30–31, concerned with the reconstitution of Israel (i.e., the northern kingdom), come from the early period of Jeremiah's ministry. According to 2 Kings 23, Josiah's reforming measures included parts of the former northern kingdom (= Israel), and Jeremiah may have supported these efforts with prophecies about the restoration of Israel. If so, the oracles in Jer. 30–31 have been updated and are placed in a context where they point to a new future for all of God's people.
- 27. See Cogan, "Chronology," 1:1006, for brief explanations of these terms.
- 28. See briefly ibid., 1:1008; Galil, Chronology of the Kings, 108-18.
- 29. See the two articles by A. Malamat, "The Last Kings of Judah and the Fall of Jerusalem: An Historical-Chronological Study," *IEJ* 18 (1968): 137–56; "The Twilight of Judah: In the Egyptian-Babylonian Maelstrom," *VT* 25 (1975): 123–45; also Galil, *Chronology of the Kings*, 108–18.
- 30. Apparently the Egyptians stood to inherit Assyrian title to the region of Syria-Palestine if they supported the Assyrians in their struggle with the Babylonian rebels (see Malamat, "The Twilight of Judah," 124–29).
- 31. According to 2 Chron. 34:3–4, Josiah's physical maturation also resulted in a spiritual maturation. In the eighth year of his reign (632 B.C.) he began to seek the Lord in earnest fashion, and in his twelfth year (628 B.C.) he began a religious reform in Judah and Jerusalem.
- 32. According to 2 Chron. 35:25, Jeremiah offered a lament for Josiah upon his death.
- 33. Jehoahaz is also called Shallum in Jer. 22:11-12.
- 34. According to Dan. 1:1 Nebuchadnezzar also moved against Jehoiakim in the latter's third year and took some Judeans into exile (e.g., Daniel and his friends). Nothing about this action is recorded elsewhere in the Bible or in the Babylonian Chronicles. It may be, however, that the notice in Daniel follows an accession-year form of reckoning. See M. K. Mercer, "Daniel 1:1 and Jehoiakim's Three Years of Servitude," AUSS 27 (1989): 179–92; T. Longman, Daniel (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 43–45. If so, then the third year of Jehoiakim in Dan. 1:1 in an accession-year dating scheme would be 605 B.C. According to Jer. 46:2, the battle against the Egyptians (605) was in Jehoiakim's fourth year. The fourth year would be reckoned on a nonaccession-year scheme. Nebuchadnezzar was made king soon after the battle, and the campaign of the Babylonians in the region continued through the year. Thus the reference in Dan. 1:1 likely refers to Babylonian activity that took place sometime not long after the summer of 605.
- 35. Wiseman, Chronicles of Chaldean Kings, 69.
- 36. According to 2 Chron. 36:6 Jehoiakim was in the custody of Nebuchadnezzar. The various biblical references do not provide details of his mysterious death. See A. R. Green, "The Fate of Jehoiakim," *AUSS* 20 (1982): 103–9.
- 37. Jeremiah calls him Coniah (Jer. 22:24) and Jeconiah (24:1).

- 38. The date is calculated from Babylonian records. See Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldean Kings*, 72–73. Among the Judeans taken into exile at this time was Ezekiel.
- 39. In an astounding coincidence, archaeologists discovered ration tablets from the Babylonian administration that mention Jehoiachin and his five sons; see W. F. Albright, "King Jehoiachin in Exile," *BA* 5 (1942): 49–55.
- 40. There are two clay bullae from the time period that likely refer to this Gedaliah. The first is from Lachish and reads, "Belonging to Gedaliah [w]ho is over the house." The provenance of the second is not known; it reads, "Belonging to Gedaliah, servant of the king." For bibliography see N. Avigad, *Hebrew Bullae from the Time of Jeremiah: Remnants of a Burnt Archive* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1986), 25.
- 41. Because of the constraints of geography, an attacking army would often approach Israel or Judah from the north. Thus it is possible that Jeremiah intentionally did not name the northern threat, but simply emphasized its menacing profile and left its identity to the startled imagination of his hearers. Since Babylonian resurgence had not begun in 627 B.C.—the traditional or early date for the prophet's call—those who look for a likely foe at this time have suggested either the Scythians or the Assyrians. For the discussion see H. Cazelles, "Zephaniah, Jeremiah, and the Scythians in Palestine," in *A Prophet to the Nations: Essays in Jeremiah Studies*, ed. L. Perdue and B. Novacs (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1984), 129–49. Some scholars have even concluded that Jeremiah wrongly threatened Judah with invading hordes of Scythians or Assyrians in 627 and that later his editors used the prophecies as indications of the coming Babylonian threat.
- 42. In addition to the brief sketch of Jeremiah's theology provided in the introductory sections of this commentary, one may consult the detailed study of M. Schulz-Rauch, *Hosea und Jeremia: Zur Wirkungsgeschichte des Hoseabuches* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1996).
- 43. Jer. 36:9. As noted above, Nebuchadnezzar's army campaigned in the region during this year, destroying Ashkelon in the winter of 604. As an Egyptian appointee, Jehoiakim's future and perhaps that of Judah hung in the balance.
- 44. There are a number of accounts in the book concerned with Jeremiah's persecution at the hands of Judeans. They range from laments about his circumstances (e.g., 15:10–21) to accounts of beatings and imprisonments (e.g., 37:14–15).
- 45. In his oracles against Moab and Ammon (48:1–49:6), Jeremiah may reflect knowledge of Babylonian campaigns in Transjordan after the fall of Jerusalem and his forced relocation to Egypt. Josephus records that Babylon campaigned in Ammon as a reprisal for the murder of Gedaliah (*Ant.* 10.9.7). This campaign may be the setting for a 3d group of Judean exiles taken to Babylon in Nebuchadnezzar's 23d year (Jer. 52:30).
- 46. A perceptive sketch of elements of Jeremiah's theology is in Appendix A of D. Kidner's *The Message of Jeremiah* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1987), 163–72. This appendix is entitled "Sin, Judgment, Repentance, Grace and Salvation in the Preaching of Jeremiah." See also L. Perdue, "The Book of Jeremiah in Old Testament Theology," *Troubling Jeremiah*, ed. A. R. Pete Diamond et al. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 320–38.
- 47. See further R. Simkins, Creator and Creation: Nature in the Worldview of Ancient Israel (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994).
- 48. Jeremiah's convictions on this matter are similar to those of Hosea and Deuteronomy.
- 49. Jer. 2:11, 32; 4:22; 5:26, 31; 7:12; 8:7; 12:14, 16; 15:7; 23:13, 22, 27, 32; 29:32; 30:3, 22; 33:24; 50:6; 51:45.
- 50. Cf. 2 Sam. 7.
- 51. Christ embodies the hopes of Israel in his "threefold office" as prophet, priest, and king. See the introductory comments on interpreting the book of Jeremiah.
- 52. Jer. 3:14; 6:2, 23; 8:19; 9:19; 14:19; 26:18; 30:17; 31:6, 12; 50:5, 28; 51:10, 35. Cities are personified as feminine in the Old Testament. Jeremiah also uses the phrase "my daughter people" in 6:26; 8:11, 19–22; 9:1, 7; and the phrase "virgin daughter people" in 14:17. It is not clear whether the people as a whole are personified as God's daughter or just the people of Jerusalem are thus personified.
- 53. Cf. Jer. 7:2; 19:14; 20:1–2; 26:2; 28:1; 35:4; the phrase "which bears my Name" occurs in 7:11.
- 54. Jeremiah's assessments of polytheism and syncretism are similar to those of Zephaniah and Ezekiel.
- 55. The Hebrew word *ba'al* means master, owner, and even husband. It is a not a proper name but a title or appellative for a deity who may also have a personal name. In addition to Bible dictionary and encyclopedia entries on Baal, cf. also J. A. Dearman, "Baal in Israel: The Contribution of Some Place Names and Personal Names to an Understanding of Early Israelite Religion," in *History and Interpretation: Essays in Honour of John H. Hayes*, ed. M. P. Graham et al. (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 173–91.
- 56. Baal in the singular is in Jer. 2:8; 7:9; 11:13, 17; 12:16; 19:5; 23:13, 27; 32:29, 35; in the plural, 2:23; 9:14 (cf. Hos. 2:15 [13], 19 [17]; 11:2); for Baal as "shame" and "worthless," see Hos. 9:10; Jer. 2:8.
- 57. The verb "to rule, be king" in Hebrew is *malak*. A noun derived from the verb, meaning "king," is *melek*. Molech is from the same word and indicates a (divine) monarch or ruler. See the commentary discussion on chs. 7, 19, and 32 for additional details on this cult.
- 58. Egyptian deities: 43:12; 46:25; Moabite deity: 48:13, 46; Ammonite deity: 49:3; Babylonian deities: 50:2.

- 1. See the comments on chronology and difficulties in reckoning chronology in the introduction on the life and times of Jeremiah.
- 2. For discussion of the location of biblical Anathoth near the modern Arabic village of Anata, see J. L. Peterson, "Anathoth," *ABD*, 1:227–28.



1. W. Holladay points out (*Jeremiah*, 1:26–31) that the call of Jeremiah is close in form to that of Moses in Ex. 3:1–15; furthermore, Jeremiah may be a "prophet like [Moses]" (Deut. 18:18) for Judah and Jerusalem.



- 1. Jer. 2:23 refers to the Baals in the plural. Cf. also the references to multiple deities in 2:25, 28.
- 2. A form of the same Hebrew word (qodes) is used to describe God's setting Jeremiah apart for service in 1:5.



- 1. There is a reference in 3:6 to prophecy during the days of Josiah. Some material in this section, therefore, may reflect Jeremiah's earliest public preaching.
- 2. Ezekiel 23:1–49 is an extended treatment of the two-sisters metaphor. It is so long and developed that it presupposes a narrative form and so functions like a parable.
- 3. Jeremiah Unterman has proposed that Jer. 3:6–13 and 3:19–4:2 fit best in the days of Josiah's reforming efforts, when the prophet Jeremiah thought that wholehearted repentance might effect real change in Judah's national life. See his *From Repentance to Redemption: Jeremiah's Thought in Transition* (JSOTSup 54; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), esp. 23–38, 176–79.



- 1. See the discussion of the "foe from the north" in the introduction ("Jeremiah's Place in the Last Years of the Judean State and Its Destruction").
- 2. In this context one should compare also Ezekiel's prophecy that God will remove the heart of stone from his people and replace it with a heart of flesh (Ezek. 11:18–21). Stone is inanimate and incapable of yielding or responding, but flesh is alive and responsive. When put in the context of the "new spirit" that God will give them (11:19), a fleshly heart is then ready to respond to God.
- 3. This same motif is found in Hos. 4:3 and Joel 1:10 (see text note).
- 4. Lit., "without heart" (cf. Jer. 4:22 on foolishness). Jer. 5:23 describes the heart of the people as "stubborn and rebellious."
- 5. Cf. Matt. 13:1–17.
- 6. Repentance and renewal are goals of the book for readers.
- 7. Perhaps the modern reader will recall that the second law of thermodynamics or entropy holds that matter tends to a state of progressive disorder without the influence of mitigating factors. For example, a plant that no longer translates sunlight and water into usable energy will die; when dead, the plant will decompose.



1. See the treatment of the historical background in the introduction.

- 2. Although the accounts in 1 Sam. 1–4 do not record a destruction of Shiloh's worship center by the Philistines when they defeated Israel, Jeremiah's words imply such destruction. Also, interpreters often suggest that the memory of God's deliverance of Jerusalem during the time of Sennacherib's assault (2 Kings 18–19; 2 Chron. 32; Isa. 36–39) lies behind the Judean belief during Jeremiah's day that God would act similarly when Jerusalem was threatened by Egypt or Babylon. This is certainly possible, if not probable, but Jeremiah does not cite that deliverance. The biblical accounts indicate that the Lord answered the intercessions of Hezekiah and Isaiah by sending his angel to destroy the Assyrian army. God's command to Jeremiah that the prophet not intercede for the people indicates that this time (cf. Isa. 37:33–35) God will not protect the city or the temple.
- 3. See comments on Jer. 44 for discussion of the Queen of Heaven.
- 4. Some interpreters have concluded that Jer. 7:21–23 represents a tradition of the people's desert wandering, which did not include a sacrificial system, implying that sacrifices were not a divine mandate but a human convention. Since the pentateuchal storyline describes sacrificial worship in the desert as God's mandate, this conclusion is not likely. More probably the force of v. 22 is hyperbolic: To deny one thing is to emphasize the importance of the other. Sacrifice and offerings are the fruit of the covenant relationship, not a substitute for it.
- 5. For further details on topheths and their associations with Baal and Molech, see J. A. Dearman, "The Topheth in Jerusalem: Archaeology and Cultural Profile," *JNSL* 22 (1996): 59–71. See also comments on ch. 19.



- 1. The Hebrew word *mišpat*, used here, is singular, so that the phrase could be translated that the people "do not know the justice [or justness] of the LORD."
- 2. Verse 8 refers to the lying pen of the scribes. Scribes comprised a professional class of people employed for their abilities in reading and writing. Those who dealt with the interpretation of Torah were most likely priests (who could read and write) because knowledge of priestly duties was necessary in interpreting such matters as sacrificial ritual and distinguishing between clean and unclean items.
- 3. In all three instances, the NIV translates the literal phrase "daughter of my people" simply as "my people," assuming it refers to God's people. This is likely correct, although the literal translation could refer to Jerusalem. Contextually it seems more likely that the people themselves are being addressed as the vulnerable daughter of a heartsick Father. One should compare this phrase with the similar "Daughter Jerusalem" or "Daughter Zion." Both of these phrases refer to the city itself, not to one of its offspring.
- 4. Cf. 2:23 for the other reference to Baal in the plural.
- 5. The noun *qina* is used in 9:20 (9:19 in Heb.), where the NIV translates it as "a lament." For funeral rituals and poetry associated with them, see the introduction to the book of Lamentations.
- 6. Cf. Isa. 44:9–20 for another extended diatribe against idolatry.
- 7. The NIV uses uppercase letters because the translators understand the phrase to be a title for God.
- 8. Among mainline Protestant churches in North America, the movements associated with goddess spirituality or New Age philosophy may be tantamount to polytheism. Among conservative and evangelical churches, defense of the American way, wooden pride in orthodoxy, and preoccupation with success may be tantamount to idolatry. Among some non-Western churches, overt polytheism may be a serious issue to confront.



- See the introduction to the book for further discussion on the prose materials in Jeremiah and the composition of the book.
- 2. For a lucid discussion of the term *covenant* and for further bibliography on the significance of the word, see J. H. Walton, *Covenant: God's Purpose, God's Plan* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).
- 3. It is not clear from the context in ch. 11 whether the oath sworn to the forefathers refers to the promise of land made to Abraham and his descendants in Canaan (e.g., Gen. 12:1–7; 28:10–15) or to this same promise as it was renewed with the generation in Egyptian slavery. Stated differently, it is not clear whether the "forefathers" of 11:5 are the ancestors in Egyptian slavery or those named in Genesis 12–50.
- 4. For additional study on the vocabulary of God's choosing Israel, with attention to the covenant and marriage formulae, see T. S. Sohn, *The Divine Election of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).
- 5. For lists of blessings and curses contained in God's covenant with Israel, see Lev. 26 and Deut. 27–30. For the covenant ratification ceremony at Sinai see Ex. 24:3–8. The people promised obedience to the Lord's covenant, and the covenant with him was sealed in blood.

- 6. See the treatment of the historical setting for the book in the introduction.
- 7. In his two-volume commentary *Jeremiah*, W. Holladay proposes that several passages in Jeremiah are "counter-proclamation" to the seven-year cycle of the public reading of Deuteronomy. The years of reading would be 622, 615, 608, 601, and 594 B.C. According to Holladay, Jer. 11:1–17 is one of those counter-proclamations. See also Holladay's "A Proposal for Reflections in the Book of Jeremiah of the Seven-Year Recitation of the Law in Deuteronomy (Deut 31:10–13)," in *Deuteronomium, Entstehung, Gestalt und Botschaft*, ed. N. Lohfink (Leuven: Leuven Univ. Press, 1985), 326–28. One need not accept everything about Holladay's theory to see the possibilities of influence from Josiah and Deuteronomy on the work of Jeremiah.
- 8. In Rom. 9:4 Paul refers to the Israelites as recipients of "covenants." Probably what the apostle has in mind is the covenant with creation (Gen. 9:8–17), the Sinai covenant (Ex. 19:3–6), the covenant with David (2 Sam. 7; cf. Isa. 55:1–3), and the eschatological promise of an everlasting covenant with Israel in Ezekiel (e.g., Ezek. 16:60–63; cf. Hos. 2:18–20), interpreted as a complementary way to refer to the eschatological "new covenant" (Jer. 31:31–34) predicted by Jeremiah. Each of these affects Israel differently.
- 9. In first-person speech the covenant is called by God "my covenant" (e.g., Ex. 19:5); in third-person speech it is described as "his covenant" (e.g., Deut. 4:13).



- 1. There is a large bibliography on these texts. To cite only recent studies in English, see M. S. Smith, *The Laments of Jeremiah and Their Contexts: A Literary and Redactional Study of Jer 11–20* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990); K. O'Connor, *The Confessions of Jeremiah: Their Interpretation and Role in Chapters 1–25* (SBLDS 94; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); A. R. Diamond, *The Confessions of Jeremiah in Context: Scenes of Prophetic Drama* (JSOTSup 45; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987). These titles demonstrate that the terminology varies concerning the proper term for Jeremiah's prayers. *Lament* is an English term used to describe a type of prayer in the Old Testament that comes in the context of death or tragedy as well as those that are a response to mistreatment and persecution. Some interpreters would distinguish between these two aspects and call the latter a complaint. Others call Jeremiah's prayers "confessions." Whichever term is preferred, this basic type occurs frequently in the Psalms, and Lamentations is the title to the little book of prayers that follows Jeremiah in English versions of the Bible (see introduction to Lamentations).
- 2. The NIV translation "let me see your vengeance upon them" can also be rendered "let me see your vindication upon them." The Heb. word in question is n^eqama. It does indeed have the element of retribution or vengeance, but also that of vindicating the innocent or oppressed through judgment.
- 3. The NIV correctly renders the verb *rib* as "bring a case." It is typically used for judicial affairs and matters of dispute needing judgment or arbitration.
- 4. See the remarks in the introduction about Jesus as the fulfillment of the offices of prophet, priest, and king in the Old Testament.



1. W. D. Stacey, *Prophetic Drama in the Old Testament* (London: Epworth, 1990); K. Freibel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts: Rhetorical Nonverbal Communication* (JSOTSup 283; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).



- 1. The Hebrew text of Jer. 14:1 actually reads "droughts," an odd term that some commentators have wanted to vocalize differently. In context, however, the basic meaning is clear: There has been no rain (14:3–4).
- 2. See comments on ch. 36 for additional discussion of the date and context given in 36:9. The Greek version (LXX) reads "eighth year" instead of "fifth year."
- 3. The word translated as "backsliding" is $m^e \check{s}ubot$. It is a plural term. In singular form it is the same word used to describe "faithless" Israel in 3:6–13.
- 4. The reign of the wicked Manasseh is also narrated in 2 Chron. 33:1–20. As with the account in Kings, the sins of Manasseh are described; in addition, however, his eventual repentance is also noted (33:12–16). The references in 2 Kings and Jeremiah are concerned with the continuing influence of Manasseh's apostasy on a subsequent generation.

5. Calvin, in preaching on Jeremiah 14, said: "It is not that God does not hear the prayers of His people, for He always accepts them, but most often He does not fulfill them in the way they have requested. Their prayers are answered, but not according to their desires"; quoted from *Sermons on Jeremiah by Jean Calvin*, trans. Blair Reynolds (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1990), 1.



- 1. One may consult Holladay, *Jeremiah*, 1:447–55, for some of the lexical and interpretational difficulties. The NIV interprets Jer. 15:12–14 as a continuation of the Lord's first reply to Jeremiah, which begins in 15:11.
- 2. See comments on Jeremiah's laments in 11:18–12:17. Much of the lament in Job 3:1–26 concerns the claim that it would have been better for Job not to have been born.
- 3. There are several other places in the Old Testament where a similar concept is expressed, using the Niphal (passive) form of the verb *maşa*' (2 Kings 22:13; 23:2; 2 Chron. 34:21, 30), all of which refer to the finding of the book of the covenant during the reign of King Josiah. Ezekiel is asked to eat a scroll as part of his prophetic call (Ezek. 2:9–3:15).
- 4. See comments on this verb in Jer. 3.
- 5. In 15:19 Jeremiah is told literally that he will become as God's mouth.



- 1. One should compare Deut. 4:25–31, which also assumes that the worship of other gods in exile is a judgment that comes on Israel as a result of similar activity in the Promised Land.
- The NIV typically renders the personal name of God as "LORD." This is a tradition reaching back into the biblical period itself.
- 3. Calvin, Sermons on Jeremiah, 140.



- 1. See comments on Jer. 4:4.
- 2. J. Day, "Asherah," ABD, 1:483-87.
- 3. On the Lord's inheritance, see 2:7; 3:19; 10:16; and the Lord's plaintive lament in 12:7–9.
- 4. The word for "blessed" in Ps. 1:1 is 'ašre, not a form of the verb barak as in Jer. 17:7. The former is used more often in wisdom literature.
- 5. Refuge (mahseh) is used primarily in Psalms to describe the person and work of God (cf. Ps. 62:7; 71:7; 73:28; 91:2, 9; 94:22; 142:5).
- 6. This is particularly true of Paul (see below).
- 7. R. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Scribner's, 1932). Niebuhr claims that regardless of the personal commitments of people, their participation in public life and society's institutions involves them in collective failures. His modern analysis of "society" is a good way to understand how an Old Testament view of corporate personality and identity can be translated (in modified form) into concepts that modern people will recognize as influential on themselves.



- 1. See the discussion of symbolic acts in the comments on Jer. 13.
- 2. The common English term for forming the clay is actually "to throw" a pot.
- 3. See the comments about the call for repentance in ch. 3.

- 4. The comment is similar to 2:27, where God charges the people with turning their back ('orep) to him, yet in the day of trouble they turn and seek his deliverance.
- 5. Ch. 20 will show what kind of judgment and humiliation Jeremiah's opponents have in mind for him.
- 6. The term for pit in 18:20, 22 is used in Prov. 22:14 and 23:27 to describe the seductive trap of a prostitute. Cf. Ps. 35:7, where the psalmist laments the fact that his enemies have "without cause dug a pit for me." A similar term is used in Prov. 26:27: "If a man digs a pit, he will fall into it." This is an affirmation about act and consequence.
- 7. See comments on Jer. 7.



- 1. The name is known from extrabiblical inscriptions from the period of Jeremiah, including a reference in the Arad inscriptions. Since there was a sacrificial shrine at Arad (near where the ostraca were discovered), it may be that the Pashhur of Arad was also a priest. See Y. Aharoni, *Arad Inscriptions* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1981), inscrip. #54.
- 2. The word translated by the NIV as "stocks" is rather obscure. It may refer to some form of restraining device like a collar or to something like the stocks known from Europe and colonial America, where one is forced to sit, bound by fetters, in an unnatural and painful position.
- 3. For an introduction to Jeremiah's laments/complaints, see comments on 11:18–12:17.
- 4. The same verb (pth) is used in Ex. 22:16[15] to describe the seduction of a young woman. It can also describe the actions of a suitor or someone who courts ("allures") a female with the prospects of marriage (Hos. 2:14[16]).
- 5. The phrase indicates "the sorrowful way of the cross."



- 1. The Heb. phrase is an idiom that describes the gift of life as a "prize of war" or "booty." Cf. the similar statement in Jer. 38:2; 39:18; 45:5.
- 2. For further elaboration on this theme, see T. Longman and D. Reid, God Is a Warrior (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).



- 1. See 2 Kings 23:31–34. After a brief reign of three months following Josiah's death, Jehoahaz was removed by Pharaoh Neco; he died in exile in Egypt.
- 2. See 2 Kings 23:34–24:6. His name was Eliakim, but it was changed to Jehoiakim by Pharaoh Neco, who placed him on the throne after removing Jehoahaz. His reign lasted from 609–598 B.C. 2 Kings 24:6 simply notes that he died, while 2 Chron. 36:6 records that Nebuchadnezzar bound him in chains to take him to Babylon.
- 3. See 2 Kings 24:6–16; 25:27–30. He reigned only three months before being led into exile by Nebuchadnezzar. According to 2 Kings 25:27–30/Jer. 52:31–34 he survived at least thirty-seven years in Babylon.
- 4. See 2 Kings 24:17–25:7. He reigned approximately eleven years, from 597–587/586 B.C. The fall of Jerusalem and its destruction by the Babylonians took place at the end of his reign.
- 5. The list of social crimes in Jer. 22:3 is similar to that in 7:6.
- 6. For further comments on the cultural setting of social justice themes, see M. Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel* and in the Ancient Near East (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995). Ps. 72, for example, presupposes that the king in Jerusalem is to defend the weak and to guard justice and righteousness in the land as his God-given duties.
- 7. "Righteous" (saddiq) is also the term used for someone who is "innocent" of a legal charge.
- 8. Jer. 21:12 addresses the house of David; 22:2 speaks generally of the king of Judah who sits on David's throne, along with his "servants" and "people." Both Jer. 21:12 and 22:3 contain the injunction to "rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed."
- 9. One should compare the instructions in Deut. 21:1–9, which are designed for a community to purge itself of any guilt for "innocent blood" that may derive from an unsolved murder.

- 10. The NIV translates Jer. 36:22 as "winter apartment." This is possible, but the Heb. term at issue, *bet*, ordinarily means house. According to Mic. 3:9–10, leaders in Jerusalem had earlier built Jerusalem with bloodshed and wickedness.
- 11. See 1 Chron. 3:17–18, which lists Jehoiachin's sons. Five of his sons are mentioned in Babylonian administrative documents that detail the rations given to Jehoiachin while a prisoner in Babylon. See W. F. Albright, "King Jehoiachin in Exile," *BA* 5 (1942): 49–55.
- 12. H. Gossai, Justice, Righteousness and the Social Critique of the Eighth-Century Prophets (Bern: P. Lang, 1993).
- 13. Compare also Isa. 1:16–17; 3:13–15; 10:1–2; Mic. 2:1–5; 3:1–12; Zeph. 3:1–5.
- 14. One might compare the ethics of the letter of James or the spiritual requirements of church leaders in the Pastoral Letters (1–2 Timothy, Titus).
- 15. See comments in the introduction concerning Christ as the fulfillment of the prophetic, priestly, and royal (Davidic) offices.



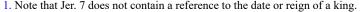
- 1. Jeremiah's younger contemporary Ezekiel describes the kings as shepherds (Ezek. 34). There are several similarities between this chapter and Ezek. 34.
- 2. Jer. 23:5–6 is repeated in 33:14–16.
- 3. The verb is a passive form of yš'. Names such as Joshua, Isaiah, Hosea, and Jesus (Matt. 1:21) are based on this word.
- 4. The "you" of Jer. 23:16 is second-person plural.
- 5. The council is the assembly of the heavenly host (cf. 1 Kings 22:19–22), where the Lord, the cosmic King, holds court and sends appointed messengers to announce his word.
- 6. Prophetic activity is known in the New Testament churches (1 Cor. 12–14; Eph. 4:11), both for good and for ill (cf. Rev. 2:20).



- 1. According to Jer. 52:31–34 Jehoiachin was kept under house arrest for thirty-seven years before being granted some additional freedom in Babylon. In 24:1 Jeconiah, an alternate form of his name, is used in the Hebrew text.
- 2. Amos had a vision of a basket of fruit (at a temple?), which became the occasion for a prophetic announcement of judgment on Israel (Amos 8:1–4).
- 3. Readers will note the correspondence in vocabulary between the call of Jeremiah (Jer. 1:10) and the (re)building and (re)planting of the exilic community.
- 4. This formula is the shorthand version of the covenant relationship established by God with Israel at Mount Sinai/Horeb. Cf. Jer. 31:33 (and reference to heart); also Ex. 6:7; Lev. 26:12; Ezek. 11:20; 36:28; Zech. 8:8. Deut. 26:16–19 has the formula in somewhat expanded form.
- 5. See comments on the heart at Jer. 4:4 and 17:9.



- 1. That is, 605 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar had been active previously as crown prince and head of the army before assuming the throne at his father's death. With the defeat of Egypt at Carchemish in the summer of 605, the Babylonians assumed political hegemony over Syria-Palestine.
- 2. In the Heb. text these oracles are located in chs. 46–51. Not only does the Greek version of Jeremiah include them here after v. 13, but the order of the oracles differs in the Greek version from that of the Hebrew chs. 46–51. The transmission of this oracular material is a complicated issue. In addition to the detailed commentaries see G. Fischer, "Jer 25 und die Fremdvolkerspruche: Unterschiede zwischen hebraischem und griechischem Text," *Bib* 72 (1991): 474–99.
- 3. C. F. Whitely, "The Seventy Years Desolation: A Rejoinder," VT 7 (1957): 416–18.
- 4. Dan. 9:24–25 employs the seventy years as a means to project a broader scale of God's providence.
- 5. See further J. Hill, Friend or Foe? The Figure of Babylon in the Book of Jeremiah MT (Leiden: Brill, 1999).
- 6. See also Isa. 51:17–23; Jer. 49:12; Lam. 4:21; Ezek. 23:31–34; Hab. 2:16.



- 2. The NIV translates the Heb. word *tora* as "law." The choice for an English equivalent is difficult. It is not clear if the *tora* of 26:4 refers to a state-mandated code or the Sinai covenant code, since we do not know what was the state-mandated religious code under Jehoiakim. If 26:4 assumes the Sinai covenant code, then its authoritative nature as divine instruction should be recognized in the temple above all places. It may not have been the "law of the land."
- 3. See the reference to "his servants the prophets" in 25:4.
- 4. See the comments about Shiloh in the interpretation of ch. 7.
- 5. Shaphan was an important official under Josiah and instrumental in the finding and interpreting of the book of the *torah* discovered during Josiah's reign (2 Kings 22). Ahikam too was part of the committee sent to consult with the prophet Huldah about the book (22:12). He was the father of Gedaliah (2 Kings 25:22; Jer. 39:14). On the influence of this scribal family, see J. A. Dearman, "My Servants the Scribes: Composition and Context in Jeremiah 36," *JBL* 109 (1990): 408–17.
- 6. Chapter 36 records the arrogant rejection of Jeremiah's words by Jehoiakim.
- 7. See also the comments on ch. 7.
- 8. Wendy M. Zoba, "'Do You Believe in God?' Columbine and the Stirring of America's Soul," *Christianity Today* (October 4, 1999), 33–40.



- 1. For a more complete explanation of the textual problems, see W. Holladay, Jeremiah, 2:112, 115.
- 2. The NIV translation assumes that "in the beginning" can qualify the fourth year of Zedekiah. If the phrase refers to the accession year of Zedekiah as proposed by most commentators, then the translation is incorrect.
- 3. This requires seeing the events of ch. 27 as occurring in the beginning of Zedekiah's reign (597/596 B.C.), while those of ch. 28 in his fourth year. The more natural reading of the narratives is to see both ch. 27 and ch. 28 as recounting events in the fourth year (594/593) of Zedekiah.
- 4. Jer. 27:22 concerns the restoration of the temple vessels taken by Nebuchadnezzar, but the restoration of the people is probably assumed (cf. 28:3–4). In any case, it is stated elsewhere that God will restore the exilic people to their land (e.g., 24:5–7).
- 5. Balaam was paid the diviner's fee in Num. 22:7. For a discussion of the terms listed in Jer. 27:9 in the context of divination in the ancient world, see M. S. Moore, *The Balaam Traditions: Their Character and Development* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990).
- 6. See comments on prophet symbolic acts in Jer. 13.



- 1. On the translation of 28:1 and the interpretation of the phrase "early in the reign," see the introductory comments in the commentary on Jer. 27.
- 2. Some English translations give the name as Jeconiah, which approximates the Hebrew name in 28:4. The name is an alternative to the better-known name Jehoiachin. For consistency, the NIV uses Jehoiachin.
- 3. In 28:8 Jeremiah makes a reference to the prophets "who preceded you and me." The "you" is masculine singular and likely refers to Hananiah. Thus Jeremiah too included Hananiah in the category of a Yahwistic prophet.
- 4. This word is used in the Decalogue (Ex. 20:16): "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor." Jeremiah uses it on various occasions (Jer. 3:10, 23; 5:2, 31; 6:13; 7:4, 8–9; 8:10; 9:3, 5; 13:25; 14:14; 16:19; 20:6; 23:14, 25–26, 32; 37:14). In the context of prophets speaking deception or falsehood, it occurs in 27:10, 14–16; 28:15; 29:9, 21, 23, 31.

- 1. Some English translations give the name as Jeconiah, which approximates the Hebrew name in Jer. 29:2. The name is an alternative to the better known name Jehoiachin. For consistency, the NIV uses Jehoiachin.
- 2. Cf. comments in 26:24 about the family of Shaphan.
- 3. The NIV translators have interpreted the Hebrew term *šalom*, traditionally rendered as "peace," as expressive of more than the absence of conflict and the presence of security; it is expressive also of material well-being ("prosperity," "prosper").
- 4. See the references to the Heb. term šeqer (lie, deception) in the comments of the previous chapter.
- 5. The Hebrew word in 28:16 and 29:32 is *sara*. It reflects a conscious turning away from something, an overt rejection of someone.
- 6. 6. See, e.g., Phil. 3:7-21; Heb. 11:1-40.



- 1. There is a reference to a book (scroll) in Jer. 30:2. Cf. 25:13; 36:4, 28, 32. See further B. Bozak, *Life Anew: A Literary-Theological Study of Jer. 30–31* (Roma: Editrice pontificio instituto, 1991).
- 2. See the relevant sections in R. P. Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986). A reasonable and theologically sensitive representative of a related view may be found in W. Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 26–52: Exile and Homecoming* (ITC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 39–47. Brueggemann is reticent about the precise historical origin of much of the material in chs. 30–31. He is more concerned to interpret the voice of God within these texts, which give hope to the hopeless.
- 3. An influential article representing this view is by N. Lohfink, "Der junge Jeremia als Propagandist und Poet: Zum Grundstock von Jer 30–31," *Le livre de Jérémie*, ed. P. M. Bogaert (Leuven: Leuven Univ. Press, 1981), 351–68. W. Holladay, *Jeremiah 2* (Hermenia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 155–67, reconstructs earlier recensions of chs. 30–31, directed first to Israel and then to Judah. Most recent commentators who hold to a traditional dating for Jeremiah's public ministry do associate some of these prophecies with his preaching during the period of Josiah's reform. Obviously those who believe that Jeremiah began his prophetic ministry in 609 or later do not equate any of the texts in chs. 30–31 with the period of Josiah's reforms.
- 4. See comments on "faithless Israel" in ch. 3.
- 5. These chapters have a complicated textual history, perhaps suggesting a lengthy process of preservation. In addition to the study of Bozak cited above, see B. Becking, "Jeremiah's Book of Consolation: A Textual Comparison: Notes on the Masoretic Text and the Old Greek Version of Jer 30–31," VT 44 (1994): 145–69.
- 6. Cf. 30:21; 33:17; also 23:5–6. In 30:9 "David" stands symbolically for someone from David's dynasty. Jeremiah stands in line with several of the prophets who predict that God's promises to the Davidic house have not failed, regardless of the quality of the current ruler or even if no descendant currently serves as king. Cf. Isa. 9:1–7; 11:1–9; Ezek. 34:23; 37:24; Hos. 3:5; Amos 9:11–12.
- 7. See the texts listed in the footnote above and the comments on Jer. 23:5–6.
- 8. One might compare the concluding words to the book of Ecclesiastes: "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (Eccl. 12:13b–14). The point of intersection with this passage in Jeremiah comes in the claim that the future will cast a different light on matters now hidden or misunderstood.
- 9. Jer. 31:1 is likely a summary heading for the prophecies contained in ch. 31. The introductory formula that begins verse 2 ("This is what the LORD says") is for a particular oracle (cf. also 31:7, 15, 23; footnote 11 below).
- 10. Israel is but one of several terms used to signify the people of God. It is used several times (e.g., 31:1–2, 4, 10, 21, 23, 27, 31, 36–37) as are the terms virgin (31:4, 21), Judah (31:23, 27, 31), Jacob (31:7, 11), Ephraim (31:6, 18, 20), and Rachel (31:15). Zion (31:6, 12; cf. 38–40) and even Samaria (31:5) are also employed to refer to the people in their various political and geographical forms.
- 11. See "This is what the LORD says" in 2, 7, 15, 35; "declares the LORD" in 1, 27, 31, 38; "hear the word of the LORD" in 10. It must be admitted that there is still ambiguity where some units of speech end and others begin. One can, for example, read 31:15–22 as one poetic unit, and see 31:23–26 as a separate prose unit.
- 12. The term is female and can refer to the capital city as indicative of the people. Since "Virgin Israel" will plant vineyards on the hills of Samaria (v. 5), it is unlikely that this reference is a metaphor for Samaria.
- 13. Note, e.g., Deut. 7:8, which uses the verb to describe God's redeeming Israel from slavery in Egypt.
- 14. The acts of Boaz in redeeming family property, marrying Ruth, and providing an heir to the family line of Elimelech are the acts of a family or kinsman-redeemer. In Heb. such a one is called a *go'el*, lit., "one who redeems." The verb *ga'al* is also used to describe God's liberation of his people from slavery in Egypt (Ex. 6:6; 15:13).
- 15. Jer. 31:15 is quoted in Matt. 2:17–18. Herod the Great's slaughter of the young boys in Bethlehem provoked lamentation among the bereaved. Matthew reminds readers of his Gospel that this is not the first time that children among God's

people have been killed. The dastardly work of Herod and the sorrows it produced are part of a larger scriptural pattern already adumbrated in Rachel's weeping. See the study by M. J. J. Menken, "The Quotation from Jeremiah 31(38).15 in Matthew 2.18: A Study of Matthew's Scriptural Text," in *The Old Testament in the New Testament: Essays in Honour of J. L. North*, ed. S. Moyise (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 106–25. Menken notes a quote from a rabbi preserved in *Genesis Rabbah* 82:10: "We find Israel called after Rachel, as it says, 'Rachel weeping for her children." The location of Rachel's tomb is thought to be near Bethlehem (cf. Gen. 35:19–20; 48:7), and this may also have given Matthew reason to see significance in the Jeremiah quote for the sad event in Bethlehem during Herod's reign.

- 16. See the survey in W. Holladay, "Jer. xxxi 22b Reconsidered: 'The Woman Encompasses the Man," VT 16 (1966): 236–39, and his further elaborations in his Jeremiah, 2:192–95.
- 17. God is the subject of the verb when used in the simple (Qal) and Niphal stems. This is not the case in Piel and Hiphil.
- 18. The same proverb is quoted in Ezek. 18:2 as part of an extended discussion on the nature of corporate judgment and individual responsibility. J. S. Kaminsky, *Corporate Responsibility in the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup 196; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 139–78.
- 19. One should compare also the use of the term ba'al in Jer. 3:14.
- 20. One cannot determine who was the first early Christian to equate the gospel message of new life in Christ with the phrase "the new covenant." Melito, bishop of Sardis in western Turkey from ca. A.D. 170–90, made a list of books that he placed under the category of "the old covenant," implying that the Christian faith could be placed in the category of "new covenant." The reference to his list comes from Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* (4.26.14). Clement of Alexandria used "new covenant" to refer to Christian faith, and the term became more widespread in the third and fourth centuries. See further, H. von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 262–68.
- 21. On matters related to writing and transfer of property, see P. King, *Jeremiah: An Archaeological Companion* (Louisville: Westminster-JohnKnox, 1993), 85–91. King specifically treats Jeremiah's purchase as part of this section of the book.
- 22. Most English readers will recognize the construct form (= "house of") of the word *bayit* in the more familiar term *bet*. Bethlehem, e.g., means "house of bread."
- 23. Cf. Lev. 25:25–28 on the significance of a family's inheritance.
- 24. The word for redemption is g^e 'ulla, derived from the verb ga'al, to redeem. A kinsman-redeemer was called a go'el, someone who could buy back or acquire family property or even family members who had been acquired by someone else (cf. comments on 31:11).
- 25. Two clay bullae (lumps of clay impressed with a seal) have been discovered in the vicinity of Jerusalem that preserve a reference to Baruch the scribe (see comments on Jer. 36). Apparently Baruch had a brother who was a government official (51:59): Seraiah, the son of Neriah, the son of Mahseiah had duties that most likely required literacy. Scribal activity may have been a family trait. Seraiah too worked in conjunction with Jeremiah.
- 26. Isaiah sealed up his testimony (Isa. 8:16), apparently so that it might be consulted in the future. Daniel's vision also is sealed for the future (Dan. 12:4), perhaps for the same reason: At the end of days it will verify his prophetic word.
- 27. Cf. Jer. 33:20-26; Ezek. 16:60-62; 37.
- 28. This Hebrew phrase uses the verb *šub* (turn, return) with a cognate accusative—more literally translated, "to turn the turning." It is a common phrase for corporate restoration and renewal (e.g., Deut. 30:3; Ps. 14:7; 53:6; 85:1; Amos 9:14; Zeph. 2:7), although it can be used for an individual (cf. Job 42:10). In addition to Jer. 33, the phrase also occurs in 29:14; 30:3, 18; 31:23; 32:44; 48:47; 49:6; 49:39. Ezekiel likewise uses the phrase (Ezek. 16:53; 29:14; 39:25).
- 29. In Jer. 33:6 the lexeme rp'("heal") occurs in both noun and verb form.
- 30. In 23:6 the future Ruler from David's line bears the (symbolic) name "The LORD our Righteousness." The NIV translates 33:16 as "the name by which it will be called," with a note that indicates "it" can also be "he" (i.e., the future ruler). Although there are variant readings among early manuscripts, the MT preserves the rendering "the name by which she [i.e., the city] will be called." Jeremiah's contemporaries will hear the name for either ruler or city as a play on the name of Zedekiah, the last Judean king, which means "The Lord is righteous." The prophecy does not indicate a saving role for Zedekiah (whom Jeremiah and Ezekiel criticize severely); instead, his name is used to declare that its unrealized promise will be fulfilled by different means and by someone else from his family.
- 31. One should compare the promise to the Levitical priesthood with the judgment speech against Eli and his priestly house at Shiloh (1 Sam. 2:27–35). Note esp. the statement in Jer. 33:35 that the faithful priest whom God will raise up is to serve with God's "anointed."
- 32. Cf. Gen. 8:22 in the context of the Noachic covenant in Gen. 9:1–17.
- 33. See comments about interpreting prophecy in the introductory section to Jer. 30–33.
- **34**. See comments on 23:5–6.
- 35. See esp. the New Testament letter to the Hebrews. In Rom. 8:34 the risen Christ is depicted as standing at God's right hand and interceding for his people.
- 36. Karla Faye Tucker is not as well known as the others listed here. In 1999 she was executed by the state of Texas for a murder she committed as a young woman under the influence of drugs and alcohol. She underwent a conversion experience in prison and served Christ faithfully for years while there. She was a model of Christian fortitude in the weeks before her execution. Her case was much discussed in the national media, raising questions about the necessity of carrying out her sentence when it was obvious to all that God had changed her life.

37. The Commission is chaired by Desmond Tutu, retired archbishop and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize.



- 1. For bibliography and details, see King, *Jeremiah: An Archaeological Companion*, 78–84. Letter 4 contains the information that the writer has been watching for the fire signals of Azekah and Lachish, and that the signal from Azekah is no longer visible. This last comment may indicate that the letter to the garrison at Lachish was written toward the end of the Babylonian campaign, when Azekah had finally fallen to the siege and only Lachish remained untaken.
- 2. Cf. Jer. 34:14 with Deut. 15:12–18 and Ex. 21:1–6. Deut. 15:12 begins with the circumstance ("If a fellow Hebrew, a man or a woman, sells himself to you ...") and concludes with the sabbatical stipulation that he or she shall go forth "free" in the seventh year. Moreover, the slave shall not be sent forth without provisions (15:13–14).
- 3. The Hebrew word *d**ror (release, liberty, freedom) is used in Jer. 34:8, 15, 17. Elsewhere it is used in Lev. 25:10 as a designation of the Jubilee release of land sold for debts, in Isa. 61:1 as a description of the freedom announced by God's messenger, and as a reference in Ezek. 46:17 to a "year of release" when parts of a royal inheritance are to return to the owner. The Heb. word is cognate to an Akkadian term used in periodic royal proclamations of debt annulments and slave manumission. See J. Lewy, "The Biblical Institution of *d**ror in the Light of Akkadian Documents," *Eretz-Israel* 5 (1958): 21–31.
- 4. Cf. discussion and bibliography in Holladay, Jeremiah, 2:236-43.
- 5. Readers should note that in the Gen. 15 ceremony God is represented by the smoking torch that passes between the divided carcasses. This symbolizes God's self-binding oath to fulfill his word to Abram. The latter is in a deep sleep and unable to participate in the ceremony other than to witness the passing of the torch and to receive the freely given promise made by God.
- 6. Kidnapping and then selling a person was a capital crime (Ex. 21:16).
- 7. The distinction between slave (a person owned by another) and servant (a person socially or institutionally obligated to another—e.g., an indentured servant) cannot be gained from the Heb. term 'ebed, which is used for both categories.



- 1. F. Frick, "The Rechabites Reconsidered," *JBL* 90 (1971): 279–87; W. McKane, "Jeremiah and the Rechabites," *ZAW* 100 (1988): 106–23. Jonadab, the founder of the Recabites, assisted Jehu in his overthrow of the Omrides (2 Kings 10:15–28). The Recabites are named as descendants of the Kenites in 1 Chron. 2:55.
- 2. So NIV. The Heb. term is the familiar one for a family—bayit, lit., "house, household."
- 3. The word 'ab can refer to someone in authority over a group and not simply the biological head of a family (cf. 2 Kings 2:12; 5:13; 6:21).
- 4. The promise is similar to those given to the Levites in Jer. 33:18. It is not a promise that the Recabite community will continue on indefinitely; it is a promise that some representative of that community will always "stand" (lit.) before the Lord
- 5. H. Richard Niebuhr, Christ and Culture (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).
- 6. Koresh is the Hebrew pronunciation of Cyrus. The leader of the Branch Davidians took his name from a twisted reading of Isa. 45:1, where Cyrus (i.e., Koresh) is called God's anointed one and is taken by the right hand.



- On the officials named, their context in Judean history, and their portrayal of scribal activity in interpreting documents, see J. Andrew Dearman, "My Servants the Scribes: Composition and Context in Jeremiah 36," JBL 109 (1990): 403–21.
- 2. For additional details, see comments on Jer. 1:1–3.
- 3. An impression in fired clay (a "bulla") of a seal with the reading "belonging to Berekyahu son of Neriyahu, the scribe," has been published by N. Avigad, *Hebrew Bullae from the Time of Jeremiah* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1986), #9 (pp. 28–29). A second bulla of the seal is in the possession of an antiquities dealer; see H. Shanks, "Fingerprints of Jeremiah's Scribe," *BAR* 22.2 (1996): 36–38. Baruch is a short form of the name Berekyahu, like Will for William or Andy for Andrew. The Heb. word *brk* means "to bless," and the name Baruch (modern English spelling) means

- "blessed." Most probably the two seal impressions were attached in ancient times to papyrus or animal skin documents prepared by Baruch, Jeremiah's companion. For additional references to scribal figures, such as Gemariah the son of Shaphan, whose bullae have come to light in modern times, see Dearman, "My Servants the Scribes."
- 4. The LXX reads eighth year rather than fifth. See Holladay, *Jeremiah*, 2:255–56, for reasons why he prefers this reading to that of the Heb. text. Although one cannot be dogmatic, it seems to me that the MT should be preferred on this point. The fifth-year date illumines the historical context, and the Greek text can be explained plausibly as a copy error.
- 5. Jeremiah 14 is a series of oracles related to the effects of drought. Verses 7–9 are a repentance liturgy and the kind of confessional prayer that would be enjoined in a "time of fasting."
- 6. No details are given about the hiding of Jeremiah and Baruch. Almost certainly, however, it took cooperation from others to keep the two hid successfully. The comment of the narrator is a theological one. God willed their survival. In this context it is interesting to note the account of the Lord's prophets being hidden during the time of Ahab and Jezebel. According to 1 Kings 18:3–4, Obadiah, the official in charge of the royal palace, had hidden two groups of prophets in caves and provided them with sustenance.



- 1. Jeremiah 45 fits thematically with the accounts of the fall of Jerusalem and its aftermath, but it is out of place chronologically with the previous chapters (see comments on ch. 45). Chapter 39 has verbal parallels with ch. 52 and 2 Kings 25. It seems that accounts of the fall of the city have been refracted in several literary settings.
- 2. See G. von Rad, Old Testament Theology (2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 2:206-10, and references there.
- 3. See the discussion of this period from the perspective of international history in A. Malamat, "Twilight of Judah," VT 25 (1974): 123–45.
- 4. One should compare these words with Jer. 21 and 27; 38:2 and 21:9 are essentially the same quotation.
- 5. The only other occurrence of the phrase (the verb used is *rph* in Piel) in the Old Testament is Ezra 4:4. The phrase occurs in Lachish letter 6:6.
- 6. The palace official is called Ebed-Melech, which means "servant of the king" in Hebrew. The "name" may be nothing more than his title. Jer. 38:7 describes him as a man from Cush and a *saris*. Cush is the biblical term for the territory associated with Egypt and descended from Ham (Gen. 10:6–7). The LXX sometimes translates Cush as "Ethiopia." The Hebrew term *saris* likely means that the African man was castrated (i.e., a eunuch). The NIV translates the term as "official," which is accurate, but provides the alternative "eunuch" in a footnote.
- 7. The word of grace to Baruch in Jer. 45:5 uses the same image as 39:18 (cf. also 21:9). Even though Jerusalem would fall to the Babylonians (and thus suffer defeat), both Ebed-Melech and Baruch would survive. Their life would be like the gift that comes from military victory.
- 8. At some point after the destruction of the city, Jews began a public ceremony of lamentation to recall its fall. That ceremony now takes place on the ninth of Ab (which falls in August). See the introduction to the book of Lamentations.
- 9. Chapter 39 names several Babylonian officials. For a treatment of their names and titles, see Holladay, Jeremiah, 2:291.
- 10. See comments on Jer. 26:24 and ch. 36.
- 11. See also comments on chs. 40–41.
- 12. The Heb. idiom states that his life is granted as a prize of war. It is the same phrase used in 21:9; 38:2; and 45:5.
- 13. It will be recalled that prophets like Amos and Hosea devoted much of their public prophetic work to announcing the fall of Israel and Samaria. Moreover, the majority of 2 Kings 17 is devoted to a polemic against Samaria and its inhabitants. Perhaps the reason that Jer. 39 and 2 Kings 17 give such a brief narration of the actual event of the fall of the cities is that they paraphrase official notices preserved in royal or state annals.
- 14. One might compare in this context the speech of President Lincoln that a "house divided cannot stand," in which he reflects also on the fact of divine judgment in history. The ripple effects of the Civil War are still working themselves out in the history of North America.
- 15. The narrator's report in 39:14 about Jeremiah's release into the hands of Gedaliah is likely proleptic, i.e., it anticipates the conversation between Jeremiah and Nebuzaradan in 40:1–6. With respect to the identity of Gedaliah, it is probable that two Iron Age seal impressions that name a certain Gedaliah as "over the house" (from Lachish) and "servant of the king" (origin unknown) refer to this Gedaliah, who was appointed governor by the Babylonians. Both phrases from the seals are titles for officials in a state administration. Given the roles of his father and grandfather, it is understandable that Gedaliah had such titles before his appointment by the Babylonians. For references to the Iron Age inscriptions and brief discussion, see Dearman, "My Servants the Scribes," 412–14. A more cautionary note regarding the equation of Gedaliah, governor of Judah, with the Gedaliah of the two inscriptions is given by B. Becking, "Inscribed Seals As Evidence for Biblical Israel? Jeremiah 40:7–41:15 par example," in Can a 'History of Israel' Be Written? ed. L. L. Grabbe (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 75–78. Becking also evaluates the possibility of identifying Ishmael and Baalis from extrabiblical inscriptions, 78–83.

- 16. Readers should compare this communication of Nebuzaradan with that of the Assyrian Rabshakeh to Jerusalem in 2 Kings 18:19–25, 28–35.
- 17. For the possibilities of its identification, see P. Arnold, "Mizpah," *ABD*, 4:879–81. Two sites are commonly suggested: Nebi Samwil or Tell en-Nasbeh.
- 18. An Ammonite seal bearing the Semitic equivalent of the name Baalis was discovered in an excavation south of Amman. See L. G. Herr, "The Servant of Baalis," *BA* 48 (1985): 169–72. The biblical text provides no reasons behind the nefarious plot of Baalis and Ishmael. Perhaps the Ammonite king saw an opportunity to expand his influence in the region now that the Judean government had been overthrown. For his part, Ishmael may have seen in Baalis the kind of support he needed to carve out his own sphere of influence once the main body of the Babylonian army left the region. He was, after all, a member of the Judean royal family. Zedekiah and his sons were gone, so perhaps Ishmael intended to play on his Davidic heritage in a bid for power.
- 19. The Marshall Plan instituted by the United States after World War II did not get derailed and illustrates how a positive policy after war and tragedy can have repercussions for stability that continue to have influence in current times.
- 20. This is the only reference to Geruth Kimham in the Old Testament; nothing else is known about it. Possibly Jeremiah and Baruch went to the prophet's family property (cf. Jer. 32:1–15; 37:12). Another possibility is that Jeremiah and Baruch were living on property belonging to Baruch. Baruch came from a prominent scribal family. One supposes the family had significant property holdings.
- 21. In his thirty-seventh year as king (567) Nebuchadnezzar did conduct a successful campaign against Pharaoh Ahmosis II.
- 22. The places named in 44:1 are in different parts of Egyptian territory, indicating a comprehensive address to the Judeans in Egypt.
- 23. Queen of Heaven is a title for a goddess. She is mentioned in 7:18 as a deity worshiped in Jerusalem. Just which goddess is a disputed question. The three primary candidates are Anat, Astarte, or Asherah—to cite Canaanite deities—or possibly Ishtar, the east Semitic goddess who was popular among the Assyrians and the whole region annexed by Babylon. To make matters even more complicated, it is possible that there was some fusion between Ishtar and Astarte (the names are similar in Semitic) or some fusion between the different Canaanite goddesses. The practices of baking cakes for a goddess has been identified in the worship of Ishtar. For further discussion, see M. Smith, *The Early History of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 88–94, 145.
- 24. Note the reference in v. 19 to making cakes in the image of the Queen of Heaven.
- 25. Weston previously had been diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic.
- 26. The promise in 45:5 that Baruch will have his life as a prize of war is an idiom used for Ebed-Melech in 39:18. God the warrior (against his sinful people) is also the gracious deliverer of his servants.
- 27. The Coptic Church traces its heritage to St. Mark (the Gospel writer), who (according to tradition) came to Egypt in A.D. 45. Currently the Coptic Church is the largest group of Christians in Egypt, and they follow the monophysite wing of the church, dating from its earliest centuries. Monophysites are those Christians who believe that the earthly Jesus had but one nature (divine). As a minority group, Coptic Christians suffer periodic persecutions in Egypt and daily pressures of various kinds from their neighbors.



- 1. See, e.g., Isa. 13–23; Ezek. 25–32; Amos 1–2.
- 2. Readers should consult Jer. 25 for additional comments on the oracles against the nations.
- 3. See the first part of the introduction to Jeremiah, where there is additional discussion of the textual history of this book.
- 4. See R. E. Clements, *Prophecy and Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975), 58–72, for a judicious discussion of the prophets and the nations. On Jeremiah's oracles about the nations in chs. 46–51, see D. Christensen, *Transformations of the War Oracles in Old Testament Prophecy: Studies in the Oracles Against the Nations* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1975), 183–280.
- 5. Some examples of introductory formulae for reading include Jer. 46:2, 13; 47:1; and 49:34. The combination of poetry and prose and the length of the prophecies against Egypt and Moab suggest the editing of oral presentations. The oracles against Babylon in chs. 50–51 may have circulated separately (even in written form) before being joined with the others in chs. 46–49. There are also quotations or "echoes" of earlier prophetic material (cf. 49:18 with Zeph. 2:8–9; Jer. 49:27 with Amos 1:3–5).
- 6. There are references to "the sword" (e.g. Jer. 46:10; 47:6), bows and arrows (50:14), the war club (51:20), God's "arsenal" (50:25), and the proverbial "cup" of wrath (49:12).
- 7. For information on the Egyptians, Philistines, Transjordanian states (Ammon, Moab, Edom), Damascus, Arabs (Kedar was an oasis where some Arabs had settlements), Elam, and Babylon, see A. J. Hoerth et al., ed., *Peoples of the Old Testament World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994). Also helpful is King, *Jeremiah: An Archaeological Companion*, 45–63.
- 8. Cf. Acts 3:24–26; 13:47–48; Gal. 3:8.

- 9. See the introduction to Jeremiah for discussion of historical references. A thorough treatment of the oracles in Jer. 46–49 can be found in B. Huwyler, *Jeremia und die Völker: Untersuchungen zu den Völkerrsprüchen in Jeremia 46–49* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997).
- 10. Cf. Isa. 19:1-25; Ezek. 29-30, 32.
- 11. In Jer. 46:24 the NIV translates the Hebrew idiom as "Daughter of Egypt." Although this is grammatically permissible, it seems more likely that Egypt itself is being personified, rather than something (e.g., a city) about the nation.
- 12. 12. Cf. Ezek. 25:15-17; Amos 1:6-8.
- 13. Cf. Isa. 15–16; Ezek. 25:8–11; Amos 2:1–3; Zeph. 2:8–11; and B. Jones, *Howling Over Moab: Irony and Rhetoric in Isaiah 15–16* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996).
- 14. Lot is the nephew of Abraham. The strange episode of Gen. 19:30–38 comes in the aftermath of God's destruction of Sodom (where Lot and his family were living) and the death of Lot's wife. His daughters were motivated by concern for the continuation of the family and used the occasion of their father's drunkenness to become pregnant.
- 15. For convenient references to texts, see the discussion in Holladay, *Jeremiah*, 2:358; and W. Röllig, "Bethel," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. K. van der Toorn (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 173–75.
- 16. Deut. 30:3; Jer. 29:14; 30:18; 31:23; 32:44; 33:7. It is also used to describe the restoration of Ammon in Jer. 49:6.
- 17. Cf. Ezek. 25:1–7; Amos 1:13–15; Zeph. 2:8–11.
- 18. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus (*Ant.* 10.9.7) preserves an account that has the Babylonians campaigning in Transjordan after the defeat of Judah in 582 B.C. Perhaps this campaign is also the occasion for a third group of exiles taken to Babylon (cf. Jer. 52:28–30). Most certainly the Ammonites should expect reprisals for their role in the murder of Gedaliah
- 19. For further discussion see E. Puech, "Milcom," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 575–76; also G. Heider, "Molech," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 581–85.
- 20. Relationships between Israel/Judah and their eastern "cousins" were rocky at times. According to 2 Kings 24:2, both Ammon and Moab raided Judean territory in the last days of the Judean state.
- 21. Cf. Isa. 21:11–12; Ezek. 25:12–14; 35:1–15; Amos 1:11–12.
- 22. Nevertheless, in Amos 9:11–12 Edom is named as a nation that bears God's name and that will be incorporated into the renewed kingdom of David's descendant. One should see also the citation of this text (via the LXX) in Acts 15:12–21.
- 23. See comments on the "cup of wrath" in Jer. 49:25.
- 24. Cf. Isa. 17:1–14; Amos 1:3–5.
- 25. Cf. Isa. 21:13-17.
- 26. See the discussion in Holladay, Jeremiah, 2:382–84.
- 27. Wiseman, Chronicles of Chaldean Kings, 72–73.
- 28. See I. Ephal, *The Ancient Arabs: Nomads on the Border of the Fertile Crescent, 9th–5th Centuries B.C.* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982).
- 29. Elam is the southern part of Iran. Its capital was at Susa.
- 30. See introductory section to Jer. 46–51.
- 31. K. T. Aitken, "The Oracles Against Babylon in Jeremiah 50–51: Structures and Perspectives," *TynBul* 35 (1984): 25–63; D. J. Reimer, *The Oracles Against Babylon in Jeremiah 50–51: A Horror Among the Nations* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1992); J. Hill, *Friend or Foe? The Figure of Babylon in the Book of Jeremiah MT* (Leiden: Brill, 1999). The city of Babylon is personified as a female in several of the poetic oracles (cf. "Daughter [of] Babylon" in 51:33).
- 32. Jer. 25:12–14 announces that God will judge the Babylonians after the period of Babylonian hegemony is complete. Chapter 25 dates to the fourth year of Jehoiakim/first year of Nebuchadnezzar (i.e., 605 B.C.).
- 33. Holladay, Jeremiah, 2:401–15, has a lengthy discussion on the form, authenticity, and setting of these two chapters.
- 34. Another name for Babylon is Chaldea. Inhabitants of Babylonia are sometimes called Chaldeans.
- 35. In 51:41 the name Sheshach for Babylon is another wordplay. It is used also in 25:26.
- 36. Verses 21, 26.
- 37. The Heb. term is *rib*, a legal term. God will act to defend a proper cause.
- 38. See comments on the image of the cup in 25:15–29. The "cup" becomes something of a proverbial symbol in the New Testament (cf. Mark 10:35–40). In Rev. 18:6 Babylon, the harlot, is to drink from the "cup" of judgment. The symbolism in Rev. 18 draws heavily on Jer. 51.
- 39. For background information, see entries on these names in the Anchor Bible Dictionary.
- 40. N. Avigad, "The Seal of Seraiah (Son of) Neriah," *Eretz Israel* 14 (1978): 86–87 [in Hebrew]; and J. R. Lundbom, "Baruch, Seraiah, and Expanded Colophons in the Book of Jeremiah," *JSOT* 36 (1986): 89–114.

- 1. See comments in the introduction to Jeremiah.
- 2. The numbers given in 2 Kings 24:13–16 for the deportation at the time of Jehoiachin (the seventh year of Nebuchadnezzar) are higher than those cited in Jer. 52:28. The smaller number given in Jeremiah may include only males.
- 3. As noted in the introduction, Josephus records that the Babylonian army campaigned in Ammon as punishment for the murder of Gedaliah (*Ant.* 10.9.7). Perhaps this campaign is linked to the deportation noted in 52:30. The problem is that we do not have a firm date for the death of Gedaliah. It may have come shortly after the fall of the city in 586 B.C.
- 4. According to 2 Kings 24:8, he was eighteen years old when he became king in Judah. He was exiled to Babylon in 597 B.C. after a reign of only three months. As noted in the introduction, archaeologists excavating the ruins of Babylon discovered ration tablets that mention the name of Jehoiachin and his five sons. See W. F. Albright, "King Jehoiachin in Exile," *BA* 5 (1942): 49–55.
- 5. See the discussion of chronology in the introduction.

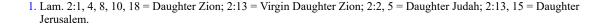


- 1. For the events leading up to the Babylonian capture and destruction of Jerusalem, see the introduction to the book of Jeremiah.
- 2. That the Hebrew poetry of Lamentations 1–4 contains an uneven poetic meter, defined as couplets with uneven lengths of line, was first proposed by K. Budde, "Das Hebraische Klagelied," ZAW 2 (1882): 1–22. He described it as the qinah meter, based on the Hebrew noun for lament/lamentation, and suggested that it can be seen in some other biblical laments where the imagery of a funeral is carried by the meter. See also W. R. Garr, "The Qinah: A Study of Poetic Meter, Syntax and Style," ZAW 95 (1983): 54–75. Current scholarship, however, uses the term meter less frequently and talks more about rhythm.
- 3. See further W. F. Lanahan, "The Speaking Voice in the Book of Lamentations," *JBL* 93 (1974): 41–49. The voices are that of the poet, personified Jerusalem, an unidentified man in ch. 3 (who may or may not be the poet personified), and the communal voice of Jerusalem's inhabitants.
- 4. Lam. 1:1 in the LXX begins as follows: "After the captivity of Israel and the destruction of Jerusalem, Jeremiah sat weeping and composed this lament, saying...." The Babylonian Talmud tractate *B. Batra* 15a holds that Jeremiah wrote his book, that of Kings, and *Qinot*. *Qinot* is the plural form of *qina* and refers to the book of Lamentations. See note 2 above.
- 5. For Jeremiah's personal laments, see Jer. 11:18–12:6; 15:10–21; 17:14–18; 18:18–23; 20:7–13; 20:14–18. During a devastating drought Jeremiah takes up the people's lament in 14:1–9. In 8:18–9:3 Jeremiah expresses deep grief and weeps over the fate of the people. The way that he expresses himself seems also to present God's tearful grief over the people's fate (note the first-person complaint by God in 9:3). God laments the loss of "his house" in 12:7–13.
- 6. For a judicious assessment of the book's authorship and date, see the discussion by D. Hillers, "Lamentations, Book of," *ABD*, 4:138–39, and his commentary on *Lamentations* (AB; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1992), 9–15. The haunting recollection of Zedekiah, Judah's last king, in 4:20 is far different from Jeremiah's sad but harsh denunciation of him. Similarly, Jeremiah's criticism of the temple and prediction of its demise are different from the plaintive comment in 1:10. In ch. 3 the poet is quite aware of his complicity in the failures of Zion. One scholar has gone so far as to suggest that parts of Lamentations are written to counteract some of Jeremiah's emphatic preaching on the judgment of Jerusalem and Judah. Cf. G. Brunet, "Une interpretation nouvelle du livre biblique des Lamentations," *RHR* 175 (1969): 115–17. While the poems of Lamentations are not inappropriate for Jeremiah, their tone is somewhat different from the "confessions" he offers.
- 7. This passage does, however, undergird the view that Jeremiah held King Josiah in great esteem, something that the book of Jeremiah also indicates (Jer. 22:15–16).
- 8. The temple was destroyed in the fifth month (2 Kings 25:8–9). The setting for the question to the prophet Zechariah is the fourth year of the Persian king Darius (Zech. 7:1), which would be 518 B.C.
- 9. For a good introduction to the characteristics of Hebrew poetry, with many bibliographical references, see the entry by A. Berlin, "Parallelism," *ABD*, 5:155–62. For Lamentations in particular, see Hillers, *Lamentations*, 16–31.
- 10. Several Psalms (Ps. 9–10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145) and Proverbs 31:10–31 are also acrostics.
- 11. The first word in each verse of Lam. 3:1–3 begins with a word whose initial letter is *aleph*, and the first word in each verse of 3:64–66 has *taw* for its initial letter.
- 12. Actually chs. 2, 3, and 4 alter the traditional sequence of letters, putting the pe() before the ayin(). This would be like putting the English letter p before the letter p. There is limited but suggestive evidence that some in Syria-Palestine followed an alphabet with the pe before the ayin. For details, see Hillers, "Lamentations, Book of," 4:139.
- 13. Amos offers a *Qinah* (a funeral lament) against Israel in 5:1–2, saying that the "Virgin Israel" is fallen, no more to rise. The term *virgin* is female and honorific and likely refers to the capital city of Samaria. F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion: A Study of the City-Lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1993), 97–

- 154, demonstrates the broad connections between prophetic judgment speeches and the description of humiliated
- 14. A classic treatment of the lament in the Old Testament is given in C. Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 165–213.
- 15. Hillers, Lamentations, 124, cites a number of the thematic and verbal parallels.
- 16. For further discussion see W. C. Gwaltney, "The Biblical Book of Lamentations in the Context of Near Eastern Lament Literature," in *Scripture in Context II: More Essays on the Comparative Method*, ed. W. W. Hallo et al. (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 191–211; Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion*. A convenient translation of some Sumerian city-laments can be found in *ANET*, 611–19. Dobbs-Allsopp proposes that the book of Lamentations as a whole is an example of a city-lament genre. Hillers, *Lamentations*, 32–39, speaks more broadly of the "city-lament tradition."
- 17. Some English translations (e.g., NIV) render the Hebrew phrase bat siyyon () as "daughter of Zion" while others render "Daughter Zion." There are complex grammatical matters in the discussion, but the better rendering in my judgment is the latter. "Daughter Zion" is the personified symbol of Jerusalem herself (cities are feminine in Hebrew); "Daughter of Zion" leaves open the possibility that it is someone who belongs to the city that is being described or addressed as the daughter. See the following helpful studies on this matter: M. E. Biddle, "The Figure of Lady Jerusalem: Identification, Deification and Personification of Cities in the Ancient Near East," in *The Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspective*, ed. K. Lawson Younger et al. (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1991), 173–94; E. Follis, "Zion, Daughter of," ABD, 6:1103; and T. Frymer-Kensky, In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth (New York: Fawcett, 1992), 168–78.
- 18. On this issue, see the discussion in M. Ydit, "Av, The Ninth of," in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (16 vols.; Jerusalem: MacMillan, 1971), 3:936–40. According to the Talmud (b. Ta'an. 30b), this commemoration of the temples' destructions is as important as Yom Kippur (= the Day of Atonement).
- 19. One thinks of the impact in modern culture of the studies on death and dying by E. Kubler-Ross, and more particularly the ways in which she has assisted people in processing their grief. This is not to endorse all that has been claimed for her studies; rather, it is to note how influential she has been in her psychological analysis of the process. Indeed, there is a whole industry related to grief, death, and dying in Western culture. Among her works are: *On Death and Dying* (New York: MacMillan, 1969); *Questions and Answers on Death and Dying* (New York: Collins, 1974); *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* (Englewood, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975); *To Live Until We Say Goodbye* (Englewood, N.J.: Prentice-Hall); *Living With Death and Dying* (New York: MacMillan, 1981); and *On Children and Death* (New York: MacMillan, 1983).
- 20. C. Westermann, "The Complaint Against God," in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*, ed. T. Linafelt and T. Beal (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 233–41 (quote on p. 236). See also his *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).
- 21. F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, "Tragedy, Tradition, and Theology in the Book of Lamentations," *JSOT* 74 (1997): 29–60, proposes that Lamentations is a work about tragedy. He points out that the book contains more complaints addressed to God than confessions of sin on the part of the community. Judgment on sin, he maintains, *is* a claim of the book, but the perspectives associated with tragedy and suffering are dominant. He understands that one contribution of the book is the heroic response to tragedy, i.e., the community should not react passively to suffering. Another is the compassion that the articulation of suffering brings. A third is the possibility that healing comes with the recitation of the laments.
- 22. K. Heim, "The Personification of Jerusalem and the Drama of Her Bereavement in Lamentations," in *Zion, City of Our God*, ed. R. S. Hess and G. J. Wenham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 129–69.
- 23. In some Christian liturgies portions of Lamentations are read during Holy Week, including the Tenebrae service. Making Lamentations a part of the scriptural lesson for Holy Week entails an interpretation of the book as a witness to human suffering that Jesus has taken up and made his own.
- 24. J. Calvin, Commentaries on the Prophet Jeremiah and Lamentations (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 513.



- 1. On the cultural habit of depicting cities as female and on the language of funeral, see the introduction. "Unclean" and "nakedness" are used by the prophets (e.g., Ezek. 7:19–20; ch. 16) to depict sinful behavior. Whether such usage developed as part of the prophetic speech repertoire or whether they borrowed it from another rhetorical tradition is unknown. Judgments about clean and unclean are the work of priests and Levites. In 2 Chron. 29:5 Levites are asked to remove the "defilement" (so NIV) from the sanctuary. It is the same term translated "unclean" in Lam. 1:17.
- 2. In Amos 7:2, 5, Jacob is a synonym for Israel and refers to the northern kingdom and its capital city of Samaria. Cf. Lam. 2:2–3.
- 3. In the Heb. text of Lam. 1:3, the verbs associated with Judah are inflected as feminine.
- 4. This last phrase can refer to physical illness or emotional distress (cf. Isa. 1:5; Jer. 8:18).
- 5. Cf. Lam. 4:21–22 and the caustic language about Edom.





- 1. See the discussion in the introduction regarding authorship.
- 2. Among these elements are: description of dire circumstances, references to the persecution of the enemy, plea for God to judge the enemies, plea to God for protection or deliverance, invitation to repentance. Two examples can be cited for comparison. Psalm 56 speaks of the persecutions of the enemies and implores God to be gracious and to deliver the psalmist. Psalm 88 speaks of travail as the threats of the "pit" (cf. Lam. 3:53, 55).
- 3. See, e.g., Job 9:34 and 21:9 (3:1); Job 19:8 (3:2); Job 7:18 (3:3); Job 3:23 (3:7); Job 30:20 (3:8); Job 7:20 (3:12); Job 6:4 (3:13). Other examples could be cited.
- 4. See Mic. 7:8–10, where sitting in darkness is a sign of judgment (see also Job 23:16–17).
- 5. See Hos. 2:6, where God builds a wall so that the wayward mother (Israel) cannot find her way.
- 6. Ps. 10:9; 22:13; Hos. 13:7-8.
- 7. Ps. 7:12–13; 38:2–3.
- 8. Ps. 11:1; 69:1-2; 124:2-7; 140:5.
- 9. Cf. Job 6:11; also 1 Sam. 10:8; 13:8.
- 10. D. A. Baer and R. P. Gordon, "\,\bar{\textsigma}\,\bar{\text{n}}\,\bar{\text{NIDOTTE}}\,2:211-18.
- 11. M. Butterworth, "DTTE, 3:1093–97. Lam. 3:32 pairs the words hesed and rhm (vb. in Piel, to have compassion).
- 12. Raḥum is an adjective formed from the basic root rḥm.
- 13. Heb. 'emet is a variant form of the basic term 'emuna.



- 1. Note the brief (but ominous) comment about famine in 2 Kings 25:3. Lam. 2:11–12 also reminds the reader of the insidious affliction of famine.
- 2. Deut. 28:53–57 lists cannibalism as a curse to come on God's people should they break the covenant God granted them. Lev. 26:29 similarly speaks of the eating of children as a curse to come on Israel for disobedience to the Lord. Since in Lam. 4:11 the poet speaks of God's venting his anger on Zion, it may be that he links the cannibalism of 4:10 with God's judgment and not only with a tragedy brought on by Zion's enemies. In any case, it is almost certain that he understands the fall of Zion and its horrific aftermath as the outworking of Zion's failures (i.e., breach of covenant faithfulness).
- 3. See Deut. 29:23; Isa. 1:9-10; Jer. 49:18; 50:40; cf. Matt. 11:20-24.
- 4. Ps. 106:38–39 states that the shedding of innocent blood defiles a land and the perpetrating state.
- 5. Judah traced her lineage back to Jacob and Edom to Esau (cf. Gen. 36:1, where Esau is explicitly equated with Edom).
- 6. Jeremiah uses the image several times (Jer. 13:13; 25:15–29; 48:26; 49:12; 51:7, 39). The majority of these references come in oracles against the wickedness of other nations. Cf. Hab. 2:15–16 and esp. Obad. 15–16 "The day of the LORD is near for all nations. As you [Edom] have done, it will be done to you.... Just as you drank on my holy hill, so all the nations will drink continually; they will drink ... and be as if they had never been."



1. Lam. 5:1 contains three imperatives: "Remember ... look, and see." Verse 20 has the interrogative "why," which occurs once in the Hebrew text, but it is probably assumed to do double duty with the next poetic line as well: "[Why] do you forsake us so long?" The imperative of 5:21 deserves some scrutiny. It is the Hiphil imperative of šub, a primary term

meaning "turn" or "repent." What God can demand, i.e., repentance, is something that God can also effect by working in and through the people's circumstances. Cf. 3:40, where the poet proposes that the community "return" (šub) to the Lord.

- 2. Cf. Lam. 5:20; also Ps. 13:1.
- 3. Cf. Lam. 5:19.
- 4. Cf. Lam. 5:1.
- 5. Lam. 5:16, by contrast, has: "Woe to us, for we have sinned!" (cf. 5:7).
- 6. Cf. Hos. 7:11; also Jer. 2:18.
- 7. Calvin, Commentaries on the Prophet Jeremiah and Lamentations, 300.

EZEKIEL

THE NIV APPLICATION COMMENTARY

From biblical text . . . to contemporary life

IAIN M. DUGUID



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General Editor's Preface

SOME THINK THAT EZEKIEL is difficult to interpret because of its visions. By their nature, those people say, such books are not meant to communicate truth in a literal manner. These truths do not lend themselves to scientific language. They are heavy with a surplus of meaning that goes beyond the scientific.

True, Ezekiel does have visions. True, Ezekiel is difficult to interpret. As Iain Duguid points out in his introduction to this excellent commentary, at one time or another the church fathers have called the book difficult, early rabbis considered it dangerous, and most of us have despaired of figuring out what God's message is in its pages.

However, as Professor Duguid also points out, Ezekiel's difficulty emerges not only from the visions, but also from the fact that Ezekiel was written over a number of years that spanned a chaotic, confusing time. Ezekiel spoke to people at three different phases of a crisis situation: when they were about to be overrun by a desperately cruel foreign political power, when they were overrun and deported to an alien land, and when their restoration to their lost land was in view. Each phase elicited a distinct message from the prophet.

As any parent knows, the content and tone of messages delivered before disaster strikes and those delivered afterward can be very different. When my now twenty-two-year-old son, David, was ten years old, I presented him, as a birthday present, a Swiss Army knife. Along with the knife I made a speech: "You are a responsible young man now," I intoned, "capable of handling a valuable tool that at its worst can also be used as a weapon. I fully expect you, however, never to misuse it in that way."

Two days later I arrived home from work to a house filled with the heavy, anxious air of crisis. David had threatened the seven-year-old boy next door with his Swiss Army knife. I found David in his room and made another speech: "You have misused your trust. You must apologize—and you must give me back the knife." Several days later, I made a third speech: "I love you still and always will. I believe you can handle a Swiss Army knife in the way it was meant to be used. Together we will discover the time and place for you to be a knife owner again."

Three very different speeches about the same subject: the first ritualistic, the second moralistic, the third pastoral. The first aimed at celebration of life, the second at rule-keeping and correction, the third at restoration. I did not change in my understanding of what a Swiss Army knife was and how it was to be used. But the circumstances of David's and my relationship and life did change. Thus, the speeches changed accordingly.

How should we understand the changing and sometimes irreconcilable passages of Ezekiel? Many hermeneutical principles come to bear. But one of them must be an awareness of the historical circumstances of Ezekiel's time, as Professor Duguid commends. Once that background is in place, some coherence begins to emerge.

Even with all this help, however, a key ingredient is still missing. Where does the story come from, the story that holds all the changing pieces together? It doesn't come from the Assyrians. It doesn't come from the Egyptians. It doesn't even come from the changing fortunes of Judah, Israel, or Jerusalem. To fully understand Ezekiel we must fast forward six hundred years to the life of Jesus of Nazareth. There we discover a story so inspiring, so unifying, so redemptive that the difficulties, dangers, and despairs of life begin to take on a slightly unreal cast, like the horrors of a bad movie.

In their place what becomes increasingly, overwhelmingly real is the fact of our restoration in the hands of a loving God. The last act of our lives, the third speech, is so filled with God's love that everything else takes on additional meaning. In our darkest hours, the cupped hands of God are there to catch us. The Lord is in control. Thanks be to God!

Terry C. Muck

Author's Preface

THE ART OF WRITING COMMENTARIES, like that of creating movies, is far easier to criticize than to execute. Unlike the task of writing a doctoral dissertation or a scholarly monograph, which merely demands that you write exhaustively on a topic of limited scope, a commentary demands that you write something interesting, stimulating, and relatively brief on every portion of your assigned book. A commentary series like the NIV Application Commentary series demands reflection not only on the ancient setting of the prophet but also its address to contemporary readers. Such a task could not be completed without the involvement of a host of people, each of whom in his or her own way has helped to shape the commentator or his book.

In preparing the Original Meaning sections, I have been reminded over and over of the substantial debt I owe to those who were my teachers in the study of the Old Testament. While I was a student at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, I had the enormous privilege of learning at the feet of Ray Dillard, Bruce Waltke, and Tremper Longman III, while Hugh Williamson guided my doctoral research on the book of Ezekiel at Cambridge. In the Bridging Contexts and Contemporary Significance sections, I hope that the influence of those from whom I learned how to preach is evident. The impact of the teaching of Edmund Clowney, alongside whom I now teach at Westminster Seminary in California, has been incalculable, as has the instruction and example of Tim Keller, now pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, New York. The manuscript versions of my work have been read carefully and commented on by Robert L. Hubbard Jr. and Terry Muck, both of whom have contributed greatly to the final product. In addition, the editing skills of Jack Kuhatschek and Verlyn Verbrugge have been much appreciated. My student, Shaun Nolan, prepared the diagrams in electronic form for me. The faults of the commentary, however, remain my responsibility

Writing a book of this size can be a trying task not only for the commentator but also for his family. I therefore want to thank my wife, Barb, for her unfailing love and enthusiastic support. With perceptive insight, she always asks the question that penetrates to the heart of the issue, often before it has occurred to me. Like her favorite author, John Newton,

she also reminds me daily to keep my eyes focused on the grace of God extended to us as sinners. In addition, thanks are due to my children, Jamie, Sam, Hannah, Robbie, and Rosie, who allowed me to devote some days to working on this commentary when we could otherwise have been playing on the beach. I pray that each of you may, as you grow up, come to be passionately devoted to Ezekiel's God and mine, the God whose wrath and mercy met at the cross and there accomplished our salvation. To Him be all the glory!

Abbreviations

AB Anchor Bible

ABD Anchor Bible Dictionary. D. N. Freedman et al., eds. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

AnBib Analecta biblica

ANET Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament. J. B. Pritchard, ed., 2d ed. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1955.

BASOR Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research

BBR Bulletin for Biblical Research

BDB F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1959 reprint.

BETL Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum lovaniensium

BHS Biblia hebraica stuttgartensia

Bib Biblica

BibSac Bibliotheca Sacra

BWANT Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament

BZAW Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

CBQ Catholic Biblical Quarterly

ConBOT Coniectania biblica, Old Testament

CurTM Currents in Theology and Mission

DBI Dictionary of Biblical Imagery. L. Ryken, J. C. Wilhoit, and T. Longman III, eds. Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998.

EvQ Evangelical Quarterly

FOTL The Forms of Old Testament Literature

GTJ Grace Theological Journal

HSM Harvard Semitic Monographs

HUCA Hebrew Union College Annual

ICC International Critical Commentary

Int Interpretation

ITC International Theological Commentary

JANESCU Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University

JAOS Journal of the American Oriental Society

JBL Journal of Biblical Literature

JETS Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society

JPS Jewish Publication Society

JSOT Journal for the Study of the Old Testament

JSOTS Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series

JSS Journal of Semitic Studies

LXX Septuagint

MT Masoretic Text

NCB New Century Bible

NICOT New International Commentary on the Old Testament

NIV New International Version

NIVAC NIV Application Commentary Series

NJPS New Jewish Publication Society Version

NLT New Living Translation

NTS New Testament Studies

OTL Old Testament Library

PTR Princeton Theological Review

RB Revue biblique

RSV Revised Standard Version

SBLDS Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series

SBLMS Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series

SBT Studies in Biblical Theology

ScrHier Scripta hierosolymitana

SOTSMS Society for Old Testament Study Monograph Series

TDOT Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament. G. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, eds. Tr. D. Green et al. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974—.

THAT Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament. E. Jenni and C. Westermann, eds. 2 vols. Munich: Kaiser, 1971–1976.

ThZ Theologische Literaturzeitung

TNTC Tyndale New Testament Commentaries

TOTC Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries

TynBul Tyndale Bulletin

UF Ugarit-Forschungen

VT Vetus Testamentum

WBC Word Biblical Commentary

WTJ Westminster Theological Journal

ZAW Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

ZDPV Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins

Introduction

Why Read Ezekiel?

If YOU WERE to ask your Christian friends to name their favorite book of the Bible, the book of Ezekiel would not spring to most people's minds. There are exceptions, of course. My fourteen-year-old niece is a big fan of the book, especially of the opening vision. But she is surely in the minority. In fact, I suspect that few of you picked up this commentary out of love for the book of Ezekiel. Most of you are probably reading this commentary out of curiosity, or desperation, or a mixture of both. You are seeking help in making some kind of sense out of this Old Testament book.

The book of Ezekiel is a certainly a difficult book to understand. That is hardly a new observation. The church father Jerome remarked:

As for Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, who can fully understand or adequately explain them? . . . The beginning and ending of Ezekiel, the third of the four, are involved in so great obscurity that like the commencement of Genesis they are not studied by the Hebrews until they are thirty years old.

Before Jerome, the rabbis had themselves struggled with the book of Ezekiel. For them the chief problems lay, as Jerome noted, in the beginning and ending of the book. Study of the obscurities of the opening chariot vision, which became a mystical pursuit in some circles, was thought to be not only difficult but even potentially dangerous. The rabbis recorded the cautionary tale of a child who picked up a copy of the book of Ezekiel at his teacher's home and apprehended the true meaning of the extremely obscure and much-debated Hebrew word <code>hašmal</code>, the substance of which the divine figure appears to be comprised (Ezek. 1:27). Instantly, fire came out from the <code>hašmal</code> and incinerated him.² Herein lay part of the reason for restricting study of the book in Jewish circles to those of more mature years.

At the other end of the book, the rabbis also had a problem with Ezekiel's temple vision. Here the difficulty lay in harmonizing the regulations of Ezekiel with those prescribed by Moses in the Pentateuch. That the

problems of harmonization remained unresolved by them was certainly not for want of effort on their part. One of their number, Hananiah ben Hezekiah, is said to have hidden himself away in his attic and burned three hundred barrels of oil in his lamp in his search for a reconciliation between the different laws. Thanks to the success of his labors, the book of Ezekiel as a whole was saved from being excluded from the canon.³ Unfortunately, however, the fruits of his work have not been preserved for us. Should they ever turn up, they will undoubtedly make fascinating reading. Bereft of his wisdom, other rabbis gave in to the counsel of despair, something many readers of Ezekiel can sympathize with. At those moments, they simply referred their pupils to a higher authority: Elijah would explain it all when he came.⁴

Notwithstanding the very real difficulties that exist, I do not think that we need to despair of understanding this book. Elijah has come (Mark 9:12–13); the Holy Spirit has been poured out on the church, and it is the Spirit's task to guide us into all truth (John 16:13). The book of Ezekiel is part of God's Word, part of the truth that the Holy Spirit is assigned to open up to us. It is part of what Paul was thinking about when he said that "all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). Therefore, at least in principle, the book of Ezekiel is both comprehensible and profitable to the man or woman whose eyes have been opened by the Holy Spirit.

As we proceed through this commentary, our goal will not be to study the book as an exercise in ancient history or literature but rather to seek what the Spirit has to teach us from the biblical text, where he will rebuke us, how he will correct us, and how he will train us in righteousness. Such a study will be full of relevance for contemporary Christians, for at its heart the whole of Scripture is a testimony about Jesus Christ (John 5:39). As we proceed, therefore, we will be continually looking to see how in particular ways Ezekiel points us forward to Christ.

Historical Background

THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL was composed for a particular moment in time. Unlike the Book of Mormon, the Bible is not an abstract revelation that descended to the prophet on tablets of gold from heaven. What is more,

unlike some of the other prophetic books within the Bible whose historical setting is hard to date with certainty, Ezekiel provides us with precise dates that enable us to determine accurately where in the history of God's people his writings belong. It is a prophecy given to a particular person in a particular situation at a particular juncture in redemptive history. Ezekiel was by the Kebar River in Babylonia in the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin when the visions began (1:2–3). In order to understand the book, we must explore the theological significance of that location (see comments on Ezek. 1:1–3). But for now we need to sketch in the historical background. How did a company of God's people end up in such an apparently God-forsaken location?

Part of the answer is contained in the movements of "secular" history of that day. In the preceding centuries, the neo-Assyrians, whose capital city was Nineveh, had dominated the Near East. The limits of their empire had ebbed and flowed, reaching as far as Egypt. In their forays to the west, they imposed tribute on Jehu and the northern kingdom of Israel in 841 B.C. A century later, under Tiglath-Pileser III and his son Shalmaneser V, the Assyrians made inroads into the territory of the northern kingdom, finally absorbing it in 722 B.C. The Israelite population was exiled to various parts of the Assyrian empire, and they were replaced with other people groups (2 Kings 17). Within twenty years, the Assyrians swept up to the very gates of Jerusalem itself under Sennacherib, shutting up the would-be rebel King Hezekiah "like a bird in a cage." Hezekiah's bacon was saved (if one may be permitted to use such a non-kosher idiom) only by the direct intervention of the angel of the Lord, who put to death 185,000 of the Assyrian army (2 Kings 19:35).

At the same time, the powerful Chaldean ruler Merodach-Baladan was causing trouble for Sennacherib closer to home. He sought to encourage Hezekiah's rebellious ways by sending envoys, whom Hezekiah treated to a royal display of his wealth and weaponry (2 Kings 20:13). Obviously, Hezekiah had swiftly forgotten that it was neither his wealth nor his weaponry that had rescued him when the Assyrians had come calling earlier. He probably viewed the Babylonians as a potentially useful political and military ally against their mutual foe. But such dependence on human allies, whether in the shape of the might of Egypt or of Babylon, was always reprehensible in a Judean monarch. He ruled his kingdom as a man under authority, as the vassal of King Yahweh. He was therefore not free to

make and break military and political alliances based on his own reading of political necessities. This is a theme we will see emerge again in Ezekiel.

Therefore, God sent his ambassador in Jerusalem in the shape of the prophet Isaiah. His task was to confront Hezekiah with his sin (2 Kings 20:14–18). If Hezekiah was so enthusiastic about Babylon, then he should know that at some unspecified time in the future those same Babylonians would come back and strip his palace of everything of value. The Babylonians would carry off into exile his own flesh and blood, so that they might become eunuchs in the house of the Babylonian king. It is a marker of the political and military pressure brought to bear on a small nation like Judah in such times of political uncertainty that Hezekiah regarded this oracle as *good* news, since it seemed to indicate that his own life, at least, would be lived out in peace (20:19).

Indeed, these were trying times for most small nations in the ancient Near East. Though Sennacherib crushed the Babylonian monarch in 689 B.C. and tore down the sacred city of Babylon, dragging off her patron deity Marduk, the power of the Assyrians was already on the wane. By 625 B.C., the Babylonians had freed themselves from the Assyrian yoke again, this time under the generalship of Nabopolassar. Ten years later, in 616 B.C., he marched into Assyrian territory and began to capture city after city. Even the astonishing switch in loyalties of the Egyptians, Assyria's traditional enemy, who came to the aid of their former foes, was insufficient to stem the tide. Nineveh fell in 612 B.C.; and after the decisive battle at Carchemish in 605 B.C. the Assyrio-Egyptian alliance was destroyed. Shortly thereafter, Nabopolassar died and his place was taken by his son, who is well-known to readers of the Bible by the name Nebuchadnezzar.

Although not directly involved in these events, Judah had already been caught in the crossfire. Good King Josiah, the last good king of Judah, who had led prominent reforms in public worship, went out to try to intercept the Egyptian forces marching to the aid of Assyria in 609 B.C. The motivation behind this action is not entirely clear, unless he thought to reestablish Judah as the dominant force in the Levant, something not seen since the time of David and Solomon. Whatever his reasoning, he was tragically killed in battle against the Egyptians at Megiddo.

With his death, the brief Judean experiment with orthodoxy came to an abrupt end. He was succeeded by his son Jehoahaz, whose three-month

reign followed in the wicked ways of grandfather Amon rather than in the righteous ways of father Josiah. After three months the Egyptians intervened, carrying Jehoahaz off into exile in Egypt and placing his elder brother, Eliakim, on the throne (2 Kings 23:34). As an act demonstrating covenant lordship, Pharaoh Neco renamed him Jehoiakim ("the Lord raises up"), an ironically orthodox name for yet another bad king, especially for one who had been installed on the throne by a foreign superpower.

Around 605 B.C., the Babylonians came knocking. The Egyptians were driven out of Palestine and Jehoiakim wisely switched sides, swearing allegiance to the Babylonians. Hostages were taken to Babylon from the nobility, including Daniel and his three friends. But Jehoiakim had no intention of keeping his commitments to the Babylonians, which, to be fair, probably included crushing tribute requirements. He rebelled against them in 598 B.C., no doubt crying "No taxation without representation."

This was all noble and heroic, but in the light of his pattern of wickedness in the eyes of the Lord, only one outcome was possible. The Babylonians returned and crushed his revolt; in the process, Jehoiakim died, either executed by the Babylonians⁷ or assassinated by the Judeans in hopes of winning clemency from the Babylonians.⁸ In his place, the Judeans installed his son Jehoiachin on the throne. Jehoiachin turned out to be no better than his father, either in the eyes of God or of Nebuchadnezzar. Instead of submitting to Babylon, as Jeremiah advised, he looked to Egypt for help (the perennial alternative in the Old Testament to trusting in the Lord), and within three months he was dragged off to exile in Babylon along with many of the temple treasures and more of the leading citizens. Ezekiel was one of those taken into exile in this wave.

After Jehoiachin's exile, Nebuchadnezzar placed Jehoiachin's uncle Mattaniah on the throne and renamed him Zedekiah (2 Kings 24:17). Once again, one wonders who thought up the name "The Lord is righteous" for this particular individual! It probably wasn't Nebuchadnezzar himself, nor Zedekiah, whose personal righteousness is regarded as highly problematic not only by the book of Kings but also by both Ezekiel and Jeremiah.

Zedekiah, whose personal hold on the throne appears to have been sufficiently tenuous that he did not always know or control what his officials were doing, voted for revolt in 589 B.C. Doubtless his confidence was bolstered by the promise of help from Tyre and Ammon and high hopes

of Egyptian aid. It was a fatal mistake. Nebuchadnezzar came loaded for bear. Gradually the lights went out across Judah, as one fortified city after another was pummeled into submission. Jerusalem itself came under a siege that lasted for over a year. Finally, the walls were breached, and although Zedekiah fled, he was captured and brought to Riblah. There Nebuchadnezzar made him watch while his sons were put to death, before gouging out Zedekiah's eyes and taking him away to Babylon.

The city of Jerusalem was then torn down and burned, with most of the remaining inhabitants of the land being carried off into exile. Only the poorest of the poor remained, struggling without skills or resources to scratch out a living from the land. If you imagine the kind of doomsday scenario painted in movies like *The War of the Worlds* or *Terminator*, in which society as we know it has been reduced to rubble and ash and a few shell-shocked human beings remain, desperately trying to keep themselves alive among the ruins, then you won't be too far off the mark of what life must have been like for those who remained in Judah. Just substitute the fearsome Babylonians for the Martians or the Cyborgs and you get the picture.

The years leading up to that ultimate cataclysm form the background to the prophecies in the book of Ezekiel, which span a twenty-year period before and after Jerusalem's destruction. You cannot understand this book unless you see it as the response to *Holocaust Now!*, warning God's rebellious people of the oncoming juggernaut—and then scraping up the pieces of what remained off the highway. The book itself is fundamentally arranged about the central event of the fall of Jerusalem, or more precisely, around the event of the arrival among the exiles of the news of the fall of Jerusalem (anticipated in Ezek. 24:27; realized in 33:21–22). This forms the turning point in the experience of both the prophet and God's people in exile. The prophecy, which begins by clearly depicting the end of the road for God's rebellious people (Ezek. 1–24), closes by showing that the end of the road is not the end of the story (Ezek. 34–48). Even his people's sinfulness and rebellion cannot ultimately prevail against God's electing grace.

In the providence of God, the Babylonians and the Assyrians had very different policies of exile. The Assyrians adopted the policy of divide and conquer; they would take large numbers of people from one area of their empire and resettle them in small groups in different parts of the empire. By breaking up old ties and alliances, they hoped to render the defeated peoples disorganized and disoriented, unable to mount any effective revolt. Their policy therefore represented a shuffling of the people groups around the margins of their empire, in what you might call a "melting pot" policy of imperial rule. The aim was that people would lose their original ethnic identity and become simply "Assyrians."

The Babylonians, on the other hand, followed a less assimilationist "tossed salad" model of empire. They took the leaders and skilled workers from the subjugated nations and brought them from the margins of the empire to the center, to Babylonia itself. There they treated them reasonably well and allowed them to settle in ethnic groups and to advance within the Babylonian system. The goal, from a Babylonian perspective, was to incorporate these diverse people groups in the service of the empire by bringing their various talents and gifts into the center, while allowing them to retain their own ethnic identities. In addition, the margins of the empire were thereby left impoverished and leaderless and therefore less likely to rebel against the power of the center.¹⁰

The results, from the perspective of Israel and Judah, were the different fates of the northern and southern kingdoms in exile. The northern kingdom of Israel was dispersed and effectively destroyed. Individual believers presumably remained, keeping hope alive among the Diaspora of a future reunion of the twelve tribes (as we will see in Ezekiel), but as a political entity, the northern kingdom was finished. Their land was occupied by a half-breed mixture of different ethnic groups, who had little more than a superstitious interest in the God of their land. Judah, on the other hand, remained largely denuded of population after the debacle of 586 B.C., allowing the possibility of a genuine return from exile on the part of those who had kept the faith. It was one of these groups of exiles living by the Kebar River in Babylonia, which included both faithful and not so faithful, to whom Ezekiel was commissioned to prophesy.

Authorship and Date

WHO WROTE THE BOOK that bears Ezekiel's name? There are, and have been for some time, four schools of thought on the subject. (1) Some scholars

have taken the radical view that very little of the book can be traced back to the prophet himself. This view became temporarily fashionable following the publication in 1924 of Gustav Hölscher's book, *Hesekiel: Der Dichter und das Buch.*Hölscher ascribed to Ezekiel a mere 144 verses out of the canonical 1,273, on the basis that all of the authentic oracles of the prophet were poetic or elevated prose. Although few scholars actually found Hölscher's method of separating out genuine Ezekiel texts from later accretions convincing, his successors have continued in attempting to distill out a small base layer from the later dross by a variety of means.

The criteria employed by these scholars have frequently included the requirements that the original oracles be terse and strictly uniform in style. Each oracle is allowed only to have one opening and closing formula. Texts that pick up and develop ideas from earlier in the book are held to be "clearly" secondary; only oracles expressing ideas that can be paralleled from elsewhere in preexilic prophecy are allowed to stand as original. Once the various texts have been detached from their immediate surroundings, continuities of thought or style are then used to link these separate texts into a number of different "layers" or "strata." Since the layers of text separated out by these methods do not come with signatures, the scholars often then make elaborate attempts to determine the social and historical contexts that gave birth to the different layers, and sometimes warnings are issued that even the "earliest" layer cannot naively be assumed to stem from the "historical prophet." 13

This last observation is indeed true, though in an entirely different sense from that usually intended. It can be shown, for example, that Ezekiel 22:25–29 is based on Zephaniah 3:3–4. The distinctive language of Zephaniah has been picked up and adopted, though not without changes that make the style distinctly that of Ezekiel. It is possible for us to unfold and identify these changes, but only because we have the base text of Zephaniah with which to compare it. If we did not have the text of Zephaniah, we would not be able to reconstruct it from Ezekiel's version. What is more, even if we were able to do so, our hypothetically "reconstructed" text would not be what originally belonged in Ezekiel 22. It is the present "reworked" text that is the original in this case.

This practical example suggests that in the absence of such points of comparison, the whole scholarly enterprise of reconstructing "original"

texts is fraught with fundamental methodological questions. It is like cleaning "accretions" from the ceiling of the Sistine chapel and crying "Aha" once you reach the bare plaster. In the process, it is not merely centuries of dirt that have been removed but the work of Michelangelo as well! The text as it stands is our only sure datum.

- (2) In a different direction, Hölscher's work encouraged a few scholars to argue that the entire book of Ezekiel was a pseudepigraphic work dating from much later than the Babylonian exile. C. C. Torrey, for example, argued that the book is a unity that belonged to the period around 230 B.C. For a while in the 1930s and 1940s, these two opinions captured a significant percentage of scholarly critical opinion.
- (3) But gradually the pendulum swung back to a more moderate critical position, which argues that the vast majority of the book comes from the prophet himself and his immediate disciples, and that it was essentially complete by the end of the exilic period. The outstanding figure supporting this position has been Walther Zimmerli, whose massive German commentary, with its English translation, remains the reference point of critical scholarship on Ezekiel, even though it is now thirty years old. These scholars make some use of the criteria of authenticity described above to detect significant editorial additions and changes, and thus diversity of authorship within the book; however, in contrast to the radical scholars, they date most of those changes relatively close to the lifetime of the prophet himself.
- (4) In recent academic work, there has been something of a resurgence of support for a more conservative position regarding the relationship of the prophet and the book. The excellent commentaries by Daniel Block in the New International Commentary on the Old Testament series and by Moshe Greenberg in the Anchor Bible series acknowledge in principle the possibility that there may have been editorial additions and revisions made by the disciples of the prophet. Indeed, Ezekiel 1:2–3 seems to be a fairly routine example of just such an editorial comment, locating the work of the prophet in space and time for those who did not hear him or know him firsthand. Yet both commentaries work in practice from the initial assumption that the present contents of the book essentially come to us from the hand of the prophet himself, an assumption that their own work helps to support. As Greenberg puts it:

the persuasion grows on one . . . that a coherent world of vision is emerging, contemporary with the sixth-century prophet and decisively shaped by him, if not the very words of Ezekiel himself.¹⁵

Their position still remains a minority opinion in scholarly circles, compared to the moderate critical position argued by the disciples of Zimmerli. Nonetheless, it is the firm conviction of this writer that they are fundamentally accurate in their assessment. When the text is allowed to speak for itself, it conveys a coherent and consistent worldview that addresses the situation of those exiled from Judah in the sixth century B.C. There seems, therefore, little good reason to assign significant portions of it to late and clumsy redactors. What is more, if the editing process is neither late nor clumsy, why must we assign it to anyone other than the prophet himself?¹⁶ It is simpler to accept the testimony of the book itself than to multiply unnecessarily complex theories of authorship.

Ultimately, however, the authority of the text does not lie in our ability to demonstrate that it comes to us directly from the mouth of the prophet. Nor does it lie in the assessment of the book by an authoritative body of human beings, whether a council of academics or a council of the church, that it is worthy of a place in the canon. In the final analysis, as the Reformers insisted, Scripture is self-authenticating. Though there may be supporting witnesses, such as the testimony of God's people down through the ages or the testimony of those who have studied the book in depth, for us to be convinced of its divine origin and authority over us requires a work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Only this internal illumination will enable us to recognize the book and receive it for what it really is: nothing less than the word of the Sovereign Lord.¹⁷

Interpreting Ezekiel

WITHIN THE HISTORY of the church, probably the most popular method of interpreting Ezekiel has been the allegorical method. Thus the church father Gregory the Great, in his homily on Ezekiel 40:6–8, identified the East Gate of the temple as Jesus, the steps leading up to the gate as the merits of the virtues that lead to salvation, and the threshold of the gate as the ancestors

of Jesus. The chamber inside the gate has length, which symbolizes longsuffering in expectation, and breadth, which symbolizes amplitude of charity. A millennium later, the Puritan William Greenhill's commentary on Ezekiel 40:16 finds significance in the windows of the visionary temple as denoting the spiritual light and joy that should be in the church of Christ. According to him, the fact that there are windows also in the "little chambers" means that even the least churches and the least saints shall not be without light and joy, teaching and comfort. In this kind of allegorical approach, the interpretation does not flow out of an understanding of the text in its original context; rather, it fastens on certain details in the text and applies them directly to our present context.

This method of interpretation is undoubtedly motivated by pastoral concerns. These preachers desired to help their people benefit from *all* of Scripture. After all, is not all Scripture inspired by God and profitable in the life of the believer (2 Tim. 3:16)? Indeed, although unfashionable in the contemporary world, not everyone would agree that such an approach to difficult texts is problematic. Charles Spurgeon, that prince of Victorian preachers, defended the practice of allegorizing—or as he called it, "spiritualizing"—on the grounds of its pragmatic value. According to him, provided that it is done within certain limits,

a great deal of real good may be done by occasionally taking forgotten, quaint, remarkable, out of the way texts; I feel persuaded that if we appeal to a jury of practical, successful preachers, who are not theorizers, but men actually in the field, we shall have a majority in our favour. It may be that the learned rabbis of our generation are too sublime and celestial to condescend to men of low estate; but we who have no high culture, or profound learning, or enchanting elegance to boast of, have deemed it wise to use the very method the grandees have proscribed; for we find it one of the best ways of keeping out of the rut of dull formality and it yields a sort of salt with which to give flavour to unpalatable truth.²⁰

On the grounds of gospel success, Spurgeon therefore defends (to cite just one example) a sermon preached on the text: "The owl, the night hawk and the cuckoo" (Lev. 11:16). If you wonder how it might be possible to get a profitable sermon out of that verse, his explanation is well worth reading! He would have been quite happy to "spiritualize" Ezekiel's visionary temple in the same way as William Greenhill did.²¹

It is interesting, however, to note the tone of Spurgeon's defense. Insisting that you should always preach the "plain, literal sense" of the text is, according to him, an elitist proposal. It is the kind of idea forwarded by the "learned rabbis," those who esteem "high culture" and "profound learning." Of course, he is right. What I mean by that is that it is a difficult task to expound what he describes as the "plain, literal sense" of the text (i.e., the meaning of the text within its original context) week after week. To do so requires a significant amount of hard work and depth of biblical knowledge. This is particularly true in the case of a book like Ezekiel, whose surface meaning seems at first sight singularly uninviting. It is not surprising that so many ordinary preachers and Bible study teachers shy away from such an approach to Ezekiel, feeling unprepared to tackle its numerous complexities. On the other hand, it is relatively easy to preach the simple gospel week by week and merely vary the text from which you preach it.

Those who by the grace of God are "learned rabbis," whether as a result of formal academic study or self-directed reading, should not despise such simple proclamation of the gospel. In the history of the church, many have been brought into God's kingdom and nourished on the central truths of the gospel in that way. What God has chosen to use, let us not be overly hard on. As we have already noted, this kind of allegorical interpretation stemmed from a firm conviction of the inspiration and usefulness of every portion of God's Word; thus, rather than not expound part of the Word because its plain sense was not understood, these preachers proclaimed what they knew to be true from elsewhere in the Bible.

Yet we should also recognize that such allegorical interpretation has many dangers. Spurgeon himself was aware of some of them: The exposition given may strain common sense, as in the case of the preacher who discoursed on the Trinity from the three baskets on the head of Pharaoh's baker. Allegorical interpretation may also be used as a means of

impressing your audience with what a clever person you are. In some cases, it may lead to undervaluing or forgetting the factual and historical nature of the texts on which you are preaching. But one of the biggest drawbacks of allegorical interpretation, even at its best, is that it does not train your listeners to interpret the Scriptures for themselves. Even when done well, it almost inevitably leaves the people impressed by the teacher's personal ability and "spirituality" rather than being equipped to feed themselves from the Word. The congregation comes out of church saying, "I would never in a million years have seen that truth there," instead of, "How obvious it is! How could I have missed what the passage was clearly saying?"

Jim Elliot, one of the five missionaries who were killed in 1957 while attempting to reach the Auca Indians of Ecuador with the gospel, was an intensely—dauntingly—spiritual young man. Yet he once wrote this entry in his journal:

Meditation yesterday on the curtains and boards [of the tabernacle] seemed fruitless. . . . Somehow the study of the tabernacle seems fruitless. I can see no plausible interpretation method. My brethren who are older and much more experienced have been able to draw much from it in type. Lord, I need to have my spirit refreshed with some new thought from Thy Word. Open my eyes and let me behold some of those "wondrous things" contained in Thy Law.²²

Growing up in Brethren circles on a diet of allegorical preaching, Elliot felt that only a direct infusion of divine insight could enable him to understand such a difficult text. As a result, he berated himself for being unable to pull a spiritual rabbit out of the exegetical hat in the way his favorite preachers always seemed able to do. The true fault lay more with his favorite preachers than with him, however. The purpose of this commentary is to enable you to understand more fully what the text is about in its original context. In that way, understanding its true meaning, there need be no resort to allegorical interpretation to derive spiritual food from this portion of God's Word.

On the other hand, it is necessary to point out that what we mean by "understanding the text in its original context" does not imply what is sometimes termed in contemporary discussion *literal interpretation*. This latter approach means, according to Charles Ryrie, "interpretation which gives to every word the same meaning it would have in normal usage, whether employed in writing, speaking or thinking."²³ To put it like this begs the question of what "normal" usage is in the prophets, as Ryrie is himself aware. Ryrie's response to that potential objection is that his approach does not deny the possibility of figurative or symbolic speech. However, it insists that "prophecies are to be *normally* interpreted... as any other utterances are interpreted."²⁴ The key point to observe is that for him, the genre of prophecy is fundamentally one of normal or plain speech. He supports his case by citing the fulfillment of Micah 5:2, which prophesies that the Christ will be born in Bethlehem. Indeed, Jesus was literally born in Bethlehem, not just in some analogous small town in Judah.

But does the Bible itself support Ryrie's claim? Certainly *some* Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled literally in the New Testament. Some of those Old Testament prophecies were equally clearly understood in a literal manner prior to their fulfillment. Thus, Herod could be advised by the chief priests and teachers of the law where to go looking for the Christ child on the basis of Micah 5:2 (Matt. 2:4–5). However, other prophecies from the Old Testament were fulfilled in a way that would have been completely unexpected to preceding generations, even though they too were fulfilled in a literal way. What first-century B.C. prophecy conference would have been clearly predicting the birth of Messiah from a virgin on the basis of Isaiah 7:14? Or his crucifixion on the basis of Psalm 22? Or his physical resurrection on the basis of Psalm 16? These texts are clearly viewed by the New Testament as messianic prophecies that were literally fulfilled, yet they were only seen to be such with the benefit of 20-20 hindsight after their fulfillment in Christ, not before.

Still other Old Testament prophecies are transformationally fulfilled; that is, their New Testament fulfillment is clearly related to the Old Testament promise, but it is not exactly literal. Thus Isaiah 40:3 speaks of the coming of a messenger whose message is: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God." The New Testament sees that promise fulfilled in the coming of John the Baptizer, who is, to quote Luke, "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the

way for the Lord, make straight paths for him' "(Luke 3:4). In other words, in the New Testament, the "desert" is no longer part of the message as it was in Isaiah's proclamation, but has become the location of the messenger.

This transformational fulfillment is repeatedly found in the New Testament, perhaps in classic form in what John does in Revelation 22 with Ezekiel's temple vision of chapters 40–48. We will examine that connection in much greater detail further on in the commentary, but for now suffice it to say that the New Jerusalem is not a literal fulfillment of Ezekiel's temple, nor is the latter a millennial preparation for it. The book of Revelation shows us the temple of Ezekiel viewed through the lens of our redemption accomplished in Christ.

Nor is this merely an exegetical observation of what the New Testament does in practice in a few cases with Old Testament prophetic texts. It is in principle what the Old Testament itself tells us to do with prophetic texts. The classic Old Testament text on the nature of prophetic visions is Numbers 12:6–8, where the Lord says:

When a prophet of the LORD is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams.

But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house.

With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD.

The point of this text is a distinct contrast between the revelation by Moses (i.e., the Torah or Pentateuch) and that by means of the (true) prophets. The latter is characterized as being indirect—by vision $(mar'\hat{a})$ and dream $(\dot{h}^al\hat{o}m)$. In stark contrast, the revelation by Moses is characterized by four expressions that emphasize its directness. (1) It is "face to face," or more precisely, "mouth to mouth," a unique phrase that focuses on the verbal nature of that revelation. (2) It is "plain" or "clear" (mar'eh), not by means of dreams or visions. (3) It is "not in riddles" $(\dot{h}\hat{i}d\bar{o}t)$, unlike prophets such as Ezekiel, who were explicitly commanded by God to speak riddles (Ezek. 17:2). The revelation by Moses is transparent and self-explanatory in

comparison to the obscurities that attend the words of the prophets. (4) Finally, the revelation by Moses is superior in directness to that by the prophets because Moses saw "the form of the LORD," a reference to his encounter with God on Mount Sinai, which was so transformational that it made his face shine.²⁵

The entire burden of this text, then, is that the Old Testament should not be read in a uniform manner. Moses (the Pentateuch) should be read in a straightforward way, according to "literal interpretation." When reading the prophets, on the other hand, we should *expect* to find nonliteral forms, dreams, visions, and riddles, which are not intended to be interpreted literally but rather will be unfolded in the light of the clearer revelation of God.

But what prevents us from sliding into the morass of subjectivism in interpreting the prophets, of which Ryrie warns? Does this approach not inevitably lead to speculative allegorizing that wrenches out of the texts spiritually uplifting messages that they were never intended to bear? The answer is to recall the words of Jesus on the Emmaus road. When Jesus caught up with those two despondent disciples, who were leaving Jerusalem unaware of the resurrection, he took them back on a tour of the Old Testament Scriptures. He exposed their woefully inadequate knowledge and exegesis, saying (Luke 24:25–27):

"How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

In other words, Jesus gave these two followers a classic redemptive-historical sermon, unfolding the Old Testament and showing them how it is fulfilled in him. The point is that according to Jesus, we should expect the message of all of the prophets to be Jesus Christ! The disciples' response was not to be amazed at his cleverness in uncovering references to himself in such a wide range of sources! Rather, they were astonished at their dullness in not having perceived before what these familiar books were

about.²⁶ Nor was that simply his message on one particular occasion. Luke 24:44–47 gives us the substance of Jesus' teaching to all the disciples in the climactic forty-day postresurrection period:

"This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."

This is Jesus' master class in Old Testament interpretation. Note the comprehensiveness of the language he uses: "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." These three terms make up the three comprehensive divisions of the Old Testament, what Luke later designates "the Scriptures." In other words, the focus of Jesus' teaching was not a few "messianic" texts but rather the entire Old Testament. According to him, the whole Old Testament Scriptures are a message about him. More specifically, the central focus of the entire Old Testament is his sufferings, his resurrection, and the proclamation of the gospel to all nations.

Nor was the teaching of Jesus lost on his disciples. In Acts 3:18, preaching in front of the temple, Peter described the crucifixion of Jesus in these words: "This is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer." The apostle went on to speak of Jesus' second coming from heaven as being something God "promised long ago through his holy prophets. . . . Indeed, all the prophets from Samuel on, as many as have spoken, have foretold these days" (3:21, 24). Once again, notice the assertion that the central message of the prophets is Jesus' suffering and the glories that would subsequently flow from that event.

Peter explicitly formulates that principle in 1 Peter 1:10–12:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.

So too did Paul, who testified before King Agrippa (Acts 26:22–23):

I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles.

This was Paul's exegetical method that he put into practice in Thessalonica, where on three consecutive Sabbaths, he reasoned with the Jews "from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead" (Acts 17:2–3).

To sum up, then, the message of the prophets in general, and Ezekiel in particular, is not simply instruction addressed to their own day and age. Still less is it a manual to help you interpret current events in the Middle East and work out the countdown to Armageddon. The message of the prophets is Jesus, and specifically "the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow." Thus, when you interpret Ezekiel correctly, without allegory, you will find that his message is not primarily morality, or social action, or eschatology. His central message is Jesus.

To be sure, understanding this gospel will lead to a new morality in the life of believers; it will motivate and empower them for meeting the needs of a lost world and engage their passion for the eschatological vision to be realized in fullness with the return of Christ. But the heart of Ezekiel is a witness to Christ, which centers in on his suffering and glory, his death and

resurrection. The goal of this commentary is to show how this Christ-centered approach opens up the heart of the message of the ancient prophet for the contemporary believer.

Some of my readers are likely to be concerned at this point that I am selling short the ethical imperatives of the prophets in general and of Ezekiel in particular. I appreciate their concern, and I will respond with two simple points.

- (1) The gospel (the good news about Jesus' death and resurrection) is not merely the power by which God's people are transformed. The gospel is not merely the starting point from which we move on to ethics; it is the heartbeat of our lives as Christians. That is why Paul could say in 1 Corinthians 2:2: "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." Presumably, Paul is not saying that he only preached evangelistic sermons while ignoring the task of discipleship. Rather, he means that every sermon he preached had a focus on the cross of Christ, whose implications he then drew out for every area of life.²⁸ To put it simply, he never preached Ephesians 4–6 (the ethical imperatives) without Ephesians 1–3 (the gospel indicative). Our sanctification flows out of our justification.
- (2) This is important in our contemporary context because relatively few believers are short of ethical knowledge. There may be exceptions to the general rule, and there are certainly some areas where ethical instruction is sorely needed by the church. But in my own experience most Christians know a great deal about how they ought to live. Their problem is that they don't live up to what they know.²⁹ The gap is not in their knowledge but in their obedience.

How do we address this gap? Ethical sermons and Bible studies, no matter how accurately biblical their content, tend simply to add to the burden of guilt felt by the average Christian. Such teaching yields little by way of results. The gospel, on the other hand, has the power to change lives at a deep level, as men and women come to see both the depth of their sin (and therefore that their feelings of guilt were actually far too shallow) and at the same time the glorious good news that Jesus is their substitute, who has taken upon himself the punishment their sin deserved and has lived the perfect life in their place. Freed from their guilt, freed from their fear of

failure, freed from their love of reputation, these people are now equipped to change.³⁰

Finally, this approach requires a different orientation to preaching (and, I would argue, Bible study) than is common in our churches. Typically, we have drawn a sharp division between "worship" (the first part of our service) and "preaching." Often, the latter has degenerated into "instruction" with the sole measure of its efficacy, "How much have people learned?" To aid the communication of information, we put diagrams on overhead projectors and issue handouts. Yet biblical preaching is much more than instruction: The preaching and hearing of God's Word is itself worship in its most profound sense. Its goal is doxological, that is, that men and women might be brought to see in a new way the glory of God and to bow their hearts in adoration and praise. Such preaching will certainly change lives, but it will be concerned even more fundamentally that God should be glorified. Like the apostle Paul, we pray (Eph. 3:20–21):

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Central Themes of the Book of Ezekiel

THE TASK THAT was assigned to Ezekiel was to prophesy to the exiles of Judah, who had been carried away into captivity in distant Babylonia. It was an audience close to despair, asking why this disaster had come on them and where God was in the middle of their personal holocaust. Their assessment of their own condition was: "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off" (Ezek. 37:11). What use was a God who seemed unable or unwilling to protect his own land? What use was a God who allowed his own temple in Jerusalem to be defiled? What use was a God who allowed his own people to be carried away from the land he had promised to the patriarchs? Even if he were to intervene now on behalf of his land, how would that help those who were far away in exile? These were the questions with which the exiles struggled.

The answers to these questions permeate the book. The first and overarching theme of the entire prophecy is *the sovereignty and glory of God*. Ezekiel's opening vision is a vision of the glory of God, in all of his power and majesty (Ezek. 1). This visible glory was the mark of God's presence in the midst of his people in former times, which had first filled the tabernacle and subsequently fell on Solomon's temple at its dedication (2 Chron. 7:1–2). God had chosen the temple in Jerusalem to be his dwelling place. But now, amazingly, this same glory of God is seen by Ezekiel by the Kebar River, that is, in the midst of the exiles! The glorious and majestic sovereign God has gone into exile with his people (Ezek. 11:16).

Ezekiel 8–11 explains in visionary form why this shift has happened. The temple in Jerusalem has been utterly polluted by the abominations of the people (Ezek. 8). God's response to this defilement is twofold: He first decrees the destruction of the city and the temple (Ezek. 9), and then his glory departs from the temple to the east. He leaves slowly, haltingly, as if sorrowing over the scene, and moves towards those already in exile (Ezek. 10–11). The point of the vision is that God has not been evicted from his home by a superior force, impotent in the face of the Babylonian horde. Rather, because of the sin of his people he deliberately abandons the city of Jerusalem and its temple, decreeing their destruction. The Babylonians are merely a tool to do his will (Ezek. 21).

God's control over the entire situation is such that he can even determine the outcome of the Babylonian king's efforts to consult *his* gods through examining the liver of an animal (Ezek. 21:21)! As Proverbs 16:33 puts it: "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD." For wicked Jerusalem that is bad news, because it means that the punishment already decreed by God will surely come about and nothing can avert it (Ezek. 21:8–17). But for those already in exile, this same sovereignty represents hope. If it is indeed God who has scattered them among the nations, then he may also gather them back to himself and to their land again (11:17). He who voluntarily withdraws his glory from the defiled temple in chapter 11 is able to choose to return to a renewed and cleansed temple in chapter 43. God's sovereignty guarantees both the destruction of the sinner and the salvation of those who hope in him.

The second main theme in the book of Ezekiel could not contrast more strongly with the first: *the utter sinfulness of humans*. Yet the two themes are interrelated: To become aware of the glory of God is to receive a heightened awareness of the awfulness of sin, as Isaiah had earlier discovered (Isa. 6:5). All of the prophets preached against the sin and idolatry of their own day, but perhaps none was quite as comprehensive or as sweeping in their indictments as Ezekiel. For him, the sin of God's people stretched back throughout their entire history. Jerusalem had acted like a prostitute from the day of its birth (Ezek. 23:3) and was actually worse than Sodom (16:46–48)! Even from earliest times, from the day when God had called Israel out of Egypt and brought them into the desert, they had rebelled against him (ch. 20).

In addition to stretching back through time, the sin of God's people also stretched throughout society. It affected kings, priests, bureaucrats, prophets, the elite families of Jerusalem, elders, women—in short, every layer of society (see esp. Ezek. 22). It included sins against God (idolatry, neglecting the Sabbath, despising God's holy things; 22:7–12), as well as crimes against their fellow men and women (slander, violence, sexual impurity, bribery, extortion, oppression of the weak; 22:7–12). In order to make his point abundantly clear, Ezekiel deliberately adopts the most shocking language possible. Parts of Ezekiel 16 and 23 have been deemed by many scarcely suitable to be read aloud in church, and an ancient audience would have found its bluntness no less offensive.

The message is crystal clear, however: Sin cannot be swept under the carpet. It cannot be prettified, excused, or ignored. It is ugly, dirty, and offensive and cannot coexist with the presence of a holy God. When Jeremiah complained of those prophets and priests who dressed the wound of the people as though it were not serious, who said "Peace, peace" when there was no peace (Jer. 8:10–11), he was certainly not thinking of his younger contemporary, Ezekiel.

The third theme of the book grows out of the first two: *the inescapable coming of judgment*. That judgment will come first of all on Judah and Jerusalem. Jerusalem will be made a ruin and a reproach among the nations. Its destruction will be almost total and its people will be scattered to the four winds (Ezek. 5). It is literally the end of the road for Judah (chs. 7, 12, 15, 17, 21). They are the meat in the cooking pot, about to be cooked not

simply medium-rare or even extremely well-done, but until they are turned into a charred heap of ashes (ch. 24). What is more, this holocaust is not the result of blind fate or the expansionist ambitions of arrogant world rulers. Rather, it is the outpouring of the wrath of a holy God on a land full of bloodshed and a city full of injustice (9:9).

Nor is there any mediator who will be able to turn away God's wrath from his people. Even if Noah, Daniel, and Job were miraculously present, between them they would have only enough righteousness to save themselves, not the people of the land (Ezek. 14:12–20). There is no prophet to stand in the gap on behalf of the people and thus prevent their destruction (22:30). Ezekiel himself is prevented from interceding for the people or remonstrating with them. He is struck dumb, only able to speak to declare the word of the Lord to them (3:26–27).

Judgment begins in God's program at the center, with his sanctuary (Ezek. 9:6). But it does not end there. Just as God's sovereignty extends to the ends of the earth, so also does his judgment. Thus, after the extensive section on Israel's sin and punishment, we find a section of prophecies against the other nations (chs. 25–32). They too have sinned in their pride and mocking of Judah's fallen state, and judgment will fall on them as well.

We might call these last two themes the bad news according to Ezekiel. It is bad news indeed, but it is a reality that had to be faced nonetheless. Judah was now going into exile, and her people needed to acknowledge that the cause of this situation was their own sin, not their fathers' sin or their brothers' sin. This is the point of Ezekiel 18, a point repeated in chapter 33 at the beginning of the section on the future hope. Until Judah acknowledges the rightness of God's action, she cannot receive forgiveness.

Yet there are signs from the opening pages of the book that God's judgment will be tempered by mercy. Ezekiel's vision of God includes a throne surrounded by a rainbow (Ezek. 1:28), the covenant sign that judgment against sin will never obliterate the remnant of God's true people (see Gen. 9:13–15). This theme is reiterated in many ways: a few hairs tucked away (Ezek. 5:3), a promise to spare some (6:8), the marking of the faithful (9:4), and so on. Yet it is no coincidence that Judah must first come face-to-face with the reality and ugliness of its sin in chapters 1–24 before it can receive the promise of a new future in chapters 33–48.

The turning point of the entire book comes with the coming of news of the fall of Jerusalem, an event anticipated at the end of Ezekiel 24, which then actually occurs in 33:21–22. Now the prophet's dumbness is removed, and the good news of restoration dominates. Now the positive side even of the oracles of judgment against the foreign nations can be seen: It is a mark that at least part of God's covenant with Abraham is still in force, that "whoever curses you I will curse" (Gen. 12:3). Is it not then true that the part of the covenant that promised ultimate blessing to Abraham's descendants is also intact?

The exploration of that possibility provides the central theme for the remainder of the book, which deals with the return of the King and the restoration of the people to their land and a state of blessing. The heart of Ezekiel's vision of the renewed temple is the return of the divine glory to the Most Holy Place (Ezek. 43:1–5). Once it has returned, the East Gate of the temple is closed forever. God will never again depart from his people as he did earlier. In order to assure this continuous presence for blessing, God promises to act to transform the people, starting from the top down. Their leadership is first on his agenda. A multiplicity of bad shepherds will be replaced by one good shepherd, a new David, by whom God will restore justice for all (Ezek. 34). He will unite in himself all of God's people, from the former northern and southern kingdoms (37:15–28). The priesthood will also be purified, with only those who remained faithful permitted access to the inner part of the sanctuary (44:6–16). Laws will be established that prevent the possibility of any return to the nation's former sins (e.g., 46:16– 18). The old structures of the society that transgressed are completely swept away.

But sin does not reside simply in the structures of society; it pervades the hearts and minds of men and women. What the people need is nothing less than a new heart and a new spirit—a heart that will be willing and a spirit that will be obedient. That is what God promises to give them (Ezek. 37:1–14). What is promised is nothing short of a new creation, a radically changed world that will rise out of the ashes of the old. Even the very land in which they live will be transformed from a harsh, barren wilderness to a fruitful paradise (36:11, 35). Even though the enemies of God may still seek to stir up trouble against his people, they will never again come as an act of God's judgment and prevail against them. From henceforth, God will fight on behalf of his people, not against them (Ezek. 38–39). Judah is promised

a return to Eden, but it is now an Eden that is populated with purified Adams and that has a high fence around the forbidden tree.

These, then, are the themes we find in the book of Ezekiel: God's glory and sovereignty, human sinfulness, the certainty of judgment, and the promise of mercy and hope for the future. From a New Testament perspective, the picture presented of the future still has an air of "not yet" about it. The most prominent feature of the new temple is not free access to God, but massive gatehouses designed to keep sinners from defiling it. There is a cleansing stream flowing from the temple (Ezek. 47), yet there is still a need for regular atonement sacrifices offered by the prince on behalf of his people (45:17). There is salvation for the Promised Land (Ezek. 48), and even for the alien and stranger in their midst, but not yet for the whole world. In all of this, there is still room for a greater revelation of hope.

This greater revelation of hope is revealed in Christ, to whom Ezekiel points us forward. The Glory of God, which Ezekiel saw coming to the temple, arrived in the person of Jesus, of whom John testifies: "We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father" (John 1:14). Just as the Glory of God departed from Jerusalem and went to be with his people in exile, so Jesus left his Father's side to identify with sinful humanity, suffering "outside the camp" on behalf of his people (Heb. 13:12–13). The mediator who could not be found to turn aside judgment from Judah is now found in Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, who offered his own blood for the sins of his people (9:11–15). Jesus is the Good Shepherd promised by Ezekiel, who will restore justice for his sheep (John 10:11). All who are in him are completely new creatures, filled with the Spirit of God (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 5:18).

But the salvation revealed in Jesus is far greater even than that which was revealed to Ezekiel. The reality is far better than the anticipation. It turns out that the prophet's wildest dreams were simply not wild enough! In Christ, we have boldness to approach the throne of grace (Heb. 4:16; 10:19). The city toward which we press needs no temple (Rev. 21:22), for the final sacrifice has been offered once and for all by Christ (Heb. 10:10). In it will be not only the full number of the tribes of Israel but a great multitude of all nations, tribes, peoples, and languages (Rev. 7:5–9).

Truly, the gospel is present in the book of Ezekiel for those with eyes to see it. It may not be with the full measure of revelation found in the New

Testament—indeed it could not be—yet Ezekiel, too, deserves his place among those who "predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow" (1 Peter 1:11).

Outline

I. Ezekiel's Call and Commissioning (1:1–3:27)

- A. Preface: The Prophet's Social and Physical Location (1:1–3)
- B. The Vision of the Divine Throne-Chariot (1:4–28)
- C. The Prophet's Call (2:1–3:15)
- D. Commissioned as a Watchman (3:16–27)

II. Oracles of Doom (4:1–24:27)

- A. Prophecies Against Jerusalem and Her Land (4:1–7:27)
 - 1. Sign-Act #1: The Besieged Brick (4:1–3)
 - 2. Sign-Act #2: The Prone Prophet (4:4–8)
 - 3. Sign-Act #3: The Siege Diet (4:9–17)
 - 4. Sign-Act #4: The Shaved Head (5:1–4)
 - 5. Interpretation of the Sign-Acts (5:5–17)
 - 6. Judgment on the Mountains of Israel (6:1–14)
 - 7. The End Is Nigh (7:1–27)
- B. The Vision of the Temple (8:1–11:25)
 - 1. Four Scenes of Abomination (8:1–18)
 - 2. The Visionary Destruction of Jerusalem (9:1–11)
 - 3. The Departure of the Divine Throne-Chariot From the Temple (10:1–22)
 - 4. Judgment on Israel's Leaders (11:1–15)
 - 5. Hope for the Exiles (11:16–25)
- C. Further Oracles of Judgment (12:1–24:27)
 - 1. A Sign-Act of Preparing For Exile (12:1–20)
 - 2. Prophecy Will No Longer Be Delayed (12:21–28)
 - 3. False Prophets and Prophetesses Will No Longer Be Tolerated (13:1–23)
 - 4. Internal Idolatry Condemned (14:1–11)
 - 5. Divine Judgment Unavoidable (14:12–23)

- 6. The Parable of the Worthless Vine (15:1–8)
- 7. The Parable of the Unfaithful Wife (16:1–63)
- 8. The Parable of the Vine and Two Eagles (17:1–24)
- 9. The Proverb of Sour Grapes Answered (18:1–32)
- 10. The Parable of the Two Lion Cubs (19:1–9)
- 11. The Parable of the Uprooted Vine (19:10–14)
- 12. Israel's History of Rebellion (20:1–44)
- 13. The Song of the Sword (20:45–21:32)
- 14. The Indictment of Jerusalem (22:1–31)
- 15. The Parable of the Two Adulterous Sisters (23:1–49)
- 16. The Parable of the Cooking Pot (24:1–14)
- 17. The Death of Ezekiel's Wife; The End of Jerusalem Is Nigh (24:15–27)

III. Oracles Against the Nations (25:1–32:32)

- A. An Oracle Against Ammon (25:1–7)
- B. An Oracle Against Moab (25:8–11)
- C. An Oracle Against Edom (25:12-14)
- D. An Oracle Against Philistia (25:15–17)
- E. An Oracle Against Tyre and Her Ruler (26:1–28:19)
- F. An Oracle Against Sidon (28:20–23)
- G. Judgment for the Nations Means Salvation for Israel (28:24–26)
- H. An Oracle Against Egypt and Her Ruler (29:1–32:32)

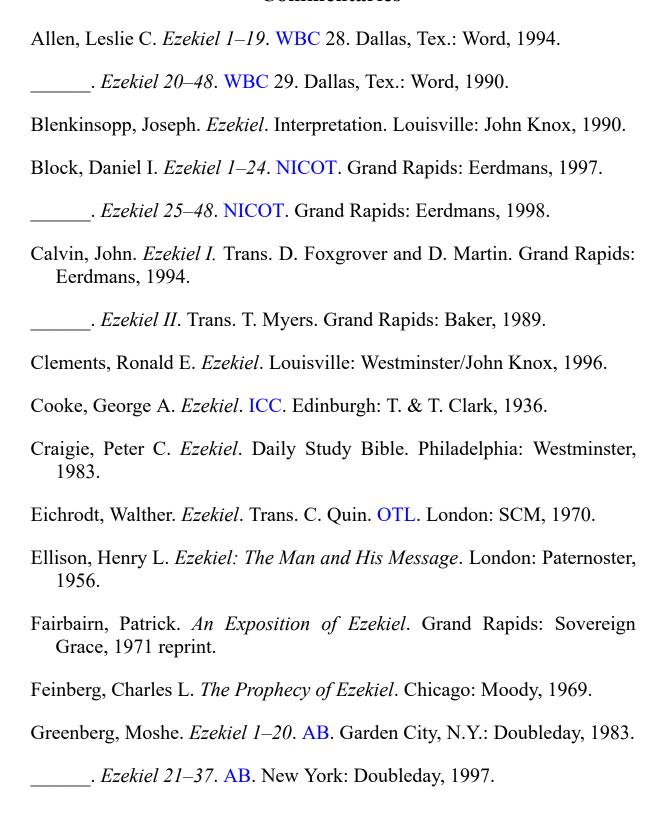
IV. Oracles of Good News (33:1–48:35)

- A. The Turning Point (33:1–33)
 - 1. The Prophet's Commission and the Call to Repentance (33:1–20)
 - 2. The News of Jerusalem's Fall Received (33:21–22)
 - 3. Challenge to Those Remaining in the Land and to Those in Exile (33:23–33)

- B. Oracles of Restoration (34:1–37:28)
 - 1. A New Shepherd (34:1–31)
 - 2. A Renewed Land (35:1–36:15)
 - 3. A Renewed Covenant (36:16–38)
 - 4. A Renewed People (37:1–14)
 - 5. A Renewed Unity (37:15–28)
- C. The New Order Put to the Final Test (38:1–39:29)
 - 1. The Raising Up and Defeat of Gog (38:1–23)
 - 2. The Final Disposal of Gog (39:1–29)
- D. The Renewed Temple (40:1–48:35)
 - 1. The Formation of the Sacred Space (40:1–42:20)
 - 2. The Filling of the Sacred Space (43:1–46:24)
 - 3. The Sacred Life-Giving River (47:1–12)
 - 4. The Redivision of the Renewed Land and City (47:13–48:35)

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Text and Commentary on Ezekiel

Ezekiel 1:1–3

IN THE THIRTIETH YEAR, in the fourth month on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the Kebar River, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.

²On the fifth of the month—it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin—³the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, by the Kebar River in the land of the Babylonians. There the hand of the LORD was upon him.

Original Meaning

THE OPENING THREE VERSES of Ezekiel serve to locate the prophet's ministry in time and space. Verse 1 tells us that the prophet received his call on the fifth day of the fourth month in the thirtieth year, among the exiles beside the Kebar River. This verse may originally have stood simply as the heading for the opening vision, addressed to people familiar with the prophet and his situation. At a later date, when the prophecies were addressed to a wider (Judean?) audience, it became necessary to clarify the details of verse 1. It was at this point that the next two verses were added, either by the prophet or someone else. This addition equates the "thirtieth year" of verse 1 with the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin (593 B.C.), specifies the "I" of verse 1 as "Ezekiel son of Buzi the priest" (see NIV text note), and identifies the Kebar River, where the exiles lived, as being "in the land of the Babylonians."

The original meaning of the "thirtieth year" in verse 1 has been much discussed from the time of the rabbis onward. The text gives us no indication from what datum the thirtieth year is counted. Three major possibilities have emerged.

(1) It is the thirtieth year since a specific event. This method of dating is well attested in the Old Testament (see, e.g., 2 Chron. 23:1, where "the seventh year" is the seventh year since the usurpation of the throne by Athaliah). Elsewhere in Ezekiel, the dates have as their consistent baseline

the exile of King Jehoiachin (as in Ezek. 1:2), while Amos dates his prophecy with reference to an earthquake (Amos 1:1).

On the basis of the other dates in Ezekiel, some have thus seen the "thirtieth year" as the "thirtieth year of King Jehoiachin's exile," which would make verse 1 refer to the date of the final prophecy of the whole book.¹ Other commentators from ancient times have sought an event thirty years previous to 593 B.C. that might serve as a suitable datum point. The identification of Josiah's reform (ca. 621 B.C.) as that "point zero" goes back to the Targum and was held by Jerome,² while David Kimḥi favored the idea of the thirtieth year since the last year of Jubilee.³

- (2) It is the thirtieth year in the reign of a specific king. This is the most common dating method in the Old Testament, used not only of the kings of Israel and Judah but also of a foreign king in Nehemiah 1:1 and 2:1. Indeed, the references in Nehemiah are of particular interest since the first simply speaks of "the twentieth year," which is not more specifically defined until the next chapter, where it becomes clear that the "twentieth year" in question is that of King Artaxerxes. Some have therefore argued that the dating in Ezekiel 1:1 is based on "Babylonian time," beginning with the accession of Nabopolassar in 625 B.C.⁴
- (3) It is the thirtieth year of the prophet's life. This view goes back to Origen and has found several contemporary supporters.⁵ One would normally expect an additional phrase in the Hebrew to indicate it as his age; yet there is a parallel at Genesis 8:13, where the "six hundred and first year" is that of Noah, as 7:11 makes clear. This date would have been significant for Ezekiel, for at that age he would have taken up his priestly ministry in the Jerusalem temple, had it still been standing.

There is no simple solution to this problem (self-evidently, since otherwise it would not continue to be discussed!). Some reference point that was presumably transparently clear to the original audience is no longer available to us. More significant, whoever added the additional notes of verses 2–3 chose not to highlight the "thirtieth year" but rather offer the date from Jehoiachin's exile. It is thus perhaps best to leave the question open and not base our exegesis on inevitably speculative reasoning. What is clear and underlined in the present form of the text is that the opening vision of the prophet Ezekiel is placed in the fifth year of Jehoiachin's exile, that is, 593 B.C., while the prophet lived among the exiles of Babylonia.

Historically and socially, therefore, Ezekiel's message was addressed to those in exile.

There in exile, Ezekiel was confronted by a dramatic spectacle: The heavens were opened and he saw "visions of God" ('mar'ôt' elōhîm, 1:1). The prophet was taken behind the scenes, as it were, and given a different, divine perspective on the events unfolding around him. The phrase "visions of God" or "divine visions" encompasses not only the opening vision of the divine throne-chariot, but all of the visions that play such an important part in Ezekiel's message.

Although Ezekiel, like other Old Testament prophets, hears the word of the Lord, for him the visual aspect of God's revelation has a particularly prominent place. Thus the book is in important ways structured around the vision of God's throne-chariot prepared for action in chapter 1, that of the abominations that cause the glory to depart from the Jerusalem temple in chapters 8–11, the vision of the renewal of the dry bones in chapter 37, and the vision of the new temple in chapters 40–48. God is dramatically at work even in the apparently hopeless situation of the exiles, a work that the prophet is invited to "show and tell" to those around him.

Bridging Contexts

God's word for the exiles. One common mistake in interpreting the prophets (and perhaps esp. Ezekiel) is to get bogged down in the minor details and thus attempt to overinterpret the text. For instance, some commentators build extensively on the "thirtieth year" of verse 1, speaking of that as the time when the prophet would have expected to enter priestly service had he been at home in Jerusalem. Yet the presence of Ezekiel 1:2–3 already serves to play down the importance of the exact identity of the thirtieth year. If verse 1 is the original heading of (part of) the prophecy for the original audience, verses 2–3 are the heading for the wider audience, that is, for *us*! They address those who do not know what the thirtieth year is, need to be informed which prophet is speaking, and cannot be expected to know that the Kebar River is in Babylonia unless that fact is made clear.

The basic point, then, of the introductory verses is that *God's word comes* to the exiles. Now it may seem self-evident to contemporary readers that God can address us and we can come to him wherever we are. The

prophet's original hearers, however, had a different understanding of their relationship to the place where they lived. If we are to understand Ezekiel's message, we must seek to understand what it meant to the people of his day to be in exile. It was not merely that they happened to be living somewhere other than they would have preferred to be; rather, their entire world had caved in upon them. In the same way that contemporary Jewish theology can be described as "Theology after Auschwitz," because every understanding of God and the world has to take into account the experience of the Holocaust, so also this part of Old Testament theology must be designated the "Theology of Exile," because of the radical impact of that earlier holocaust. Tamara Eskenazi expresses it thus:

Exile. It is not simply being homeless. Rather, it is knowing that you do have a home, but that your home has been taken over by enemies.

Exile. It is not being without roots. On the contrary, it is having deep roots which have now been plucked up, and there you are, with roots dangling, writhing in pain, exposed to a cold and jeering world, longing to be restored to native and nurturing soil. Exile is knowing precisely where you belong, but knowing that you can't go back, not yet.⁷

Weeping and dreaming. What do you do in exile? The first thing that you do is sit down and weep. As the psalmist put it in Psalm 137:1—4:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
How can we sing the songs of the LORD
while in a foreign land?

In exile, life cannot be "business as usual." How can there be joy in exile? How can there be joy when the memory is still filled with the demolition of all that is precious: Jerusalem's stones torn down, her infants slaughtered (Ps. 137:7–8)? In view of God's apparent rejection of his people, who can but pour out tears unceasingly (Lam. 2:18; 3:49)? Joy is gone and dancing turned to mourning (Lam. 5:15).

This mourning is not simply grief at the random sorrows of life, the "slings and darts of outrageous fortune," to use Shakespeare's phrase. Rather, in the midst of the pain, there is a recognition of the cause of that pain. Judah's calamity is a consequence of her own sin (Lam. 3:42; 4:13). Paradoxically, though, in the midst of that recognition is also the beginning of hope. If tragedy is not a random event but the result of God's sovereignty, then there may be hope of a new beginning. The one who has bruised can also bind up; the one who has rejected his people can restore them to himself (Lam. 5:21). God's covenant love, his *ḥesed*, is the basis for hope in the midst of tears.

Just as Moses appealed to the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob so that God would not destroy his people utterly after the incident with the golden calf (Ex. 32:13), so also in the Exile, God's commitment to the covenant brought hope. Added to this self-commitment was the basic character of God as gracious and compassionate, again as he had revealed himself originally to Moses (Ex. 34:6). Because of those facts, the possibility of forgiveness and restoration was real. Thus the book of Lamentations closes: "Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may return; renew our days as of old unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure" (Lam. 5:21–22).

Such a restoration could not be claimed presumptuously, however. The temptation, even in exile, was to hang on to glib hopes rather than truly to mourn and repent. Thus Jeremiah wrote to the exiles furiously denouncing those who promised a quick end to their troubles (Jer. 29:15–23). Such prophets found a ready audience for their words, but Jeremiah criticized them for failing to listen to God's words through the prophets, words that spoke of the sword, famine, and plague (29:17–19). Until the dregs of the bitter cup of exile had been drained, there could be no talk of a new future. For the foreseeable future—for seventy years, which in most cases was far more than their life expectancy, their future lay in Babylon. Only after the

cup of wrath had been drained would a new future be possible for Israel; only after the sin had been paid for would it be possible to speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim her comfort (Isa. 40:1–2).

In the meantime, alongside weeping, there was also room for dreaming. According to Psalm 126:1, "When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed." The dreaming actually started a long time before the captives began to return. When everything has been torn down to the foundations, when nothing remains of the structures of the past, but when at the same time there is confidence that the nation will rise again, phoenix-like, from the ashes, visionary dreams can flourish. There can be dreams of a future that will preserve the best of the past while avoiding the worst.

Ezekiel's task. This context of weeping and dreaming describes well Ezekiel's task. On the one hand, he speaks clearly and unequivocally of judgment and destruction. During the early years of his ministry, he spoke of more judgment yet to come. In 589 B.C., in spite of the warnings of Ezekiel and Jeremiah, Zedekiah rebelled against the Babylonians, hoping to break free with Egypt's help. It was a disastrous error of judgment; in the aftermath, the temple itself was destroyed and Jerusalem razed to the ground (see 2 Kings 25). The people needed to know that the events of the fall of Jerusalem and its temple were no mere accidents of fate but were the result of the people's sin. Those responsible had to be called to account.

Yet while he was called to tear down the ruins of the past, at the same time Ezekiel was called to portray also a message of hope for the future. Though the judgment was from God, so also was the possibility of restoration. In the opening portion of the book the emphasis is on tearing down: The ruins must first of all be cleared, yet hope for the future is not completely lacking. Likewise, in the latter portion of the book, though the emphasis is on hope and dreams of the future, there is also room for a return to criticism and weeping for the past.

There is thus both continuity and discontinuity in Ezekiel's presentation of the Exile. On the one hand, things can never again be as they once were. Because of the idolatry of the past, God's judgment has come upon his people with devastating effect. The glory has departed, not just symbolically but really from Israel. God has turned his face away,

abandoning his people, leading to their certain death. Had that been all there was to the history of redemption, no one could have faulted God.

But amazingly in the midst of that sentence of death comes God's recreative word of life. God speaks to these people where they are, in exile! God tears the heavens open and invites his chosen prophet to see his glory, the grounds of both judgment and hope. There will be, after the Exile, life from the dead—not because of any claim Israel may have but simply because of the mercy of God. In the meantime, Israel in exile is not forgotten or abandoned by God but is to live in the light of that promise, with hope. Though they live after the coming of night before even the first rays of dawn, yet in the light of who God is and his free promise to his people, they can live in expectant hope.

Contemporary Significance

LEARNING TO LIVE in exile. It seems to me that the social location of the book of Ezekiel in the Exile is one of the reasons for its contemporary neglect. The image of the Christian life as exile is not a common one in our days. We don't think of ourselves as exiles, and so we neglect the literature of the Exile, not simply in favor of the New Testament, but of the literature of the Exodus and of the periods of conquest and monarchy. We even prefer the writings of the return to Judah to those of the Exile; Moses and Joshua, David and Nehemiah are our mentors, not Ezekiel. Why is that? Perhaps it is because in our culture we prefer heroes and idolize success; our models are strong, "can-do" types, people who seem able to take on the world with one hand tied behind their backs. The primary paradigm we have adopted is that of the victorious Christian life.

How then do we live with the reality of life in a very different world, where victories are frequently hard to come by and right living does not always lead to success? How can we speak an encouraging word to those barely able to keep their heads above water, to those who are not living the victorious Christian life but for whom it is an achievement simply to live the surviving Christian life? What does God have to say to those of us who frequently find ourselves, like the prodigal, far away from where we should be, suffering the deserved consequences of our actions? The answer is to

balance the biblical models of exodus and conquest with the equally biblical models of wilderness and exile.

In fact, the biblical image of life in exile has actually never been more timely than it is today, for we live in a time in which people are experiencing a growing sense of alienation from the world around them. Fewer and fewer people find themselves "at home" where they live. On the one hand, in our generation millions across the globe have been forced to flee their homes through migration and ethnic cleansing, through persecution and war, as well as through economic migration in search of job opportunities.¹⁰ On the other hand, even safe and affluent communities in the West have turned relocation—and dislocation—into a way of life.11 Sometimes our email addresses seem to be the only "constant" in a rapidly changing world. In such a world, the pressing question for many is, "Where do I belong?" What address can we give that describes where our hearts are? Some of us can identify a geographical area as "home," the part of the world where we would live if we could, where our language is spoken and our faces fit. But for many, home is not where we live. We live geographically uprooted lives.

Even among those who have not experienced such a physical uprooting, there are many who endure their own personal, internal experiences of "exile." The comfortable veneer of life is easily scraped away, perhaps with the loss of a job and the comfortable lifestyle that went with it, or with the death of a loved one. There are times when the props in which we trusted are knocked away and we are left winded and gasping, not knowing which way is up or where to turn. Our entire personal world has caved in upon us in an experience that will forever shape who we are.

The tendency is at such times to feel isolated and alone in feeling this way. However, it is a far more common experience than we think. Paul Simon gave expression to the sense of alienation and disorientation of an entire generation of young Americans when he wrote:

I don't know a soul who's not been battered;
I don't have a friend who feels at ease;
I don't know a dream that's not been shattered or driven to its knees.¹²

The universality of the sense of exile ("so far away from home") that Paul Simon is describing is conveyed in the title he gave to this lyric: "An American Tune." It describes the experience of all those who have metaphorically sailed off on the Mayflower into the American dream. Nor is that a uniquely American experience. Almost all of us in the modern world know what it is to live with battered souls and shattered dreams.

In those times of personal tragedy and uprootedness, our first response is to mourn and weep, and rightly so. We turn to the psalms of lament and pour our tears out before God. But we are not to weep forever. There comes a time when we need to move on and hear the challenge of God's Word as well as its comfort. Where it is our sin that has brought us into this situation, we are to confess it to God and acknowledge our own responsibility. Even where the pain we are suffering is not caused by our sin, we need to hear his words of discipline, as he reminds us that, as Christians, we can never be "at home" in this world. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it, "Here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (Heb. 13:14). The Christian life is, in a profound sense, always one of exile in a strange land, far from home.

Ancient believers understood this. The writer of the early second-century *Epistle of Mathetus to Diognetus* reminded his friend:

As citizens, Christians share all things with others, and yet endure all things as foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. . . . They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives.¹³

Why then do we moderns persist in seeking to live as though it were not so? We put down roots as though we were here on this earth to stay forever, and we pursue the trinkets of time while ignoring the essentials of eternity. Truly, we need to learn how to live in exile.

Our true home. But living in exile is not simply a matter of gritting our teeth and getting on with it in the manner of the Stoics; we are not called to accept that life stinks, so that all we can do is make the best of a bad job. As

exiles, we are not homeless and hopeless. We do have a home—it is just not here. Though we cannot go home yet and though we feel the pain of not being home, we can still *dream* of home. As an "exile" in the United States, I have plastered the walls of my office with reminders of home: I have a map of Britain on my wall, a calendar with views of Scotland, a Scottish flag to fly on days of national significance. I read a British newspaper daily via the Internet to keep up with current events. So also, as citizens of heaven, our lives should be filled with tokens of our true home. As Paul puts it in Colossians 3:1–2: "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things."

Why do we love to read the Scriptures daily? Because they speak to us of home. Why do we live differently from those around us? Because we remember that we are soon going home (1 Peter 4:1–7). Why are we willing to suffer and even die for our faith? Because we are sure of what we hope for and certain that to be with God, even through pain, is better by far than to be comfortable without him (Heb. 11:1–2, 13–16).

But we do not simply dream about heaven, our true home; we do what we can to establish an enclave of heaven where we live. In exile, the Sabbath and the synagogue became key institutions for the Jewish community as the means by which they maintained their distinctiveness. So too for us, if we appreciate what it means to be living in exile, our Sundays will become precious and distinctive as opportunities to experience in the company of other believers a foretaste of heaven. In fact, how you use Sunday says a lot about what you really believe about heaven. If you think that heaven is a successful career and a large house, you'll use Sunday to put in extra time at work. If you think heaven is eternally doing nothing, you'll snooze Sunday away on the sofa. If you think heaven is shopping till you drop, Sunday will find you at the local mall. But if you think that heaven is to "glorify God and enjoy him forever," how are you going to spend Sunday? By glorifying him and enjoying him now! To those who look forward to spending eternity praising God among his people, spending one day in seven in like manner is surely no hardship; rather, it is an antidote to the harsh reality of life in exile.

Equally, the experience of exile should lead us to value all the more the counterculture of the new community of the saints. The exiles focused their

lives around the synagogue: It was the heart of their social lives as well as their spiritual lives. In a similar way, the infant church formed an alternative community from their earliest days, eating and spending time in one another's company as well as worshiping together (Acts 2:42–47). This is the natural response of exiles to life in an alien land and will act as an accurate measure of just how much we as Christians are truly citizens of heaven first and citizens of our earthly country second. If we truly believe that those we worship with week by week are our brothers and sisters with whom we will gladly spend eternity, then it will be entirely natural for them to be our closest friends and companions here and now.

All this is possible because to us too, in our contemporary exile, God speaks and reveals himself. Whereas in the past he spoke to the exiles through the prophet, now in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, Jesus (Heb. 1:1–2). In the coming of Jesus, God has definitively drawn aside the curtain and revealed his heavenly purpose to all of his people—that in all things God is working for the good of those who love him, so that in Christ we may ultimately be more than conquerors (Rom. 8:28, 37). To be sure, as we look around us, we do not yet see everything in subjection to Jesus (Heb. 2:8). That is part of the experience of living in exile. But by faith, we do see Jesus, crowned with glory and honor at the right hand of the Father, and believe that our present suffering is part of God's perfect plan to mold us into the image of the one who suffered first for us (2:9–10).

Ezekiel 1:4-28

I LOOKED, AND I SAW a windstorm coming out of the north—an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, ⁵and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was that of a man, ⁶but each of them had four faces and four wings. ⁷Their legs were straight; their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze. ⁸Under their wings on their four sides they had the hands of a man. All four of them had faces and wings, ⁹and their wings touched one another. Each one went straight ahead; they did not turn as they moved.

10 Their faces looked like this: Each of the four had the face of a man, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle. ¹¹ Such were their faces. Their wings were spread out upward; each had two wings, one touching the wing of another creature on either side, and two wings covering its body. ¹² Each one went straight ahead. Wherever the spirit would go, they would go, without turning as they went. ¹³ The appearance of the living creatures was like burning coals of fire or like torches. Fire moved back and forth among the creatures; it was bright, and lightning flashed out of it. ¹⁴ The creatures sped back and forth like flashes of lightning.

¹⁵As I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the ground beside each creature with its four faces. ¹⁶This was the appearance and structure of the wheels: They sparkled like chrysolite, and all four looked alike. Each appeared to be made like a

wheel intersecting a wheel. ¹⁷As they moved, they would go in any one of the four directions the creatures faced; the wheels did not turn about as the creatures went. ¹⁸Their rims were high and awesome, and all four rims were full of eyes all around.

¹⁹When the living creatures moved, the wheels beside them moved; and when the living creatures rose from the ground, the wheels also rose.

²⁰Wherever the spirit would go, they would go, and the wheels would rise along with them, because the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.

²¹When the creatures moved, they also moved; when the creatures stood still, they also stood still; and when the creatures rose from the ground, the wheels rose along with them, because the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.

²²Spread out above the heads of the living creatures was what looked like an expanse, sparkling like ice, and awesome. ²³Under the expanse their wings were stretched out one toward the other, and each had two wings covering its body. ²⁴When the creatures moved, I heard the sound of their wings, like the roar of rushing waters, like the voice of the Almighty, like the tumult of an army. When they stood still, they lowered their wings.

²⁵Then there came a voice from above the expanse over their heads as they stood with lowered wings. ²⁶Above the expanse over their heads was what looked like a throne of sapphire, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. ²⁷I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. ²⁸Like the appearance of a

rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him.

This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking.

Original Meaning

FOR EZEKIEL AMONG the exiles by the Kebar River, God's word became sight. "The heavens were opened and I saw visions of God" (1:1). Ezekiel saw in his vision an astonishing revelation of God's glory. Now there was nothing particularly new in a prophet seeing God's glory. Isaiah had seen it in a vision of the Lord in the Jerusalem temple, high and exalted on the throne (Isa. 6). Moses himself, the archetypal prophet (Num. 12:6–8; Deut. 18:15, 18), saw God's glory on Mount Sinai—a vision so glorious that it made his face shine (Ex. 33:18–23). God's glory is the visible manifestation of his presence among his people. Thus, at the dedication of Solomon's temple, the Lord demonstrated his approval of the building by filling the structure with his glory-cloud (1 Kings 8:10–11). What is new in Ezekiel, however, is the exact form that the manifestation of God's glory takes, as a comparison with Isaiah's vision makes clear.

Isaiah's vision was stately and essentially static, as befits a vision in the temple, the symbol of God's permanent resting place in the midst of his settled people. To be sure, there was sin to be atoned for, yet atonement was accomplished by a simple touch from the coals on the heavenly altar (Isa. 6:6–7). Though there was a message of judgment for the prophet to give to a stubborn people, a judgment that would continue until the cities lay ruined and the land deserted (6:11), there was no sense of that destruction reaching to Mount Zion and bringing down the temple itself.

Indeed, the events of Isaiah's own lifetime seem to have contributed to the comfortable idea that no matter what else happened, Zion was secure. The Lion of Judah would roar from Zion (Amos 1:2), but he would not abandon it. Thus, when the Assyrian king Sennacherib swept across the ancient Near East like a flood in 701 B.C., even though he reached the gates of Jerusalem, God intervened to deliver his people by means of a dramatic plague (Isa. 36–37). Lamentations 4:12 sums up the theological conclusion

drawn from these events: "The kings of the earth did not believe, nor did any of the world's people, that enemies and foes could enter the gates of Jerusalem."

In the context of this popular Zion theology, it is easy to see the difficulty that Ezekiel's earlier contemporary Jeremiah faced. He was called to oppose the complacency of those who kept repeating, "The temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD" (Jer. 7:4). His prophecies of judgment against Jerusalem were interpreted as high treason because they struck at the heart of this belief (Jer. 26:11). The temple itself had become viewed as an amulet, a lucky charm to ward off evil. In response, Jeremiah simply pointed to the lessons of history. In the past, in the days of Samuel's youth, Israel had placed the same kind of faith in the ark of the covenant, the *symbol* of God's presence, instead of in the *reality* of God's presence. The result had been the destruction of Shiloh and the "exile" of the ark (Jer. 7:12–15; cf. 1 Sam. 4, esp. v. 22, which reads lit., "Glory has gone into exile from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured").

It was this same false perception of safety that Ezekiel's vision challenged. Two kinds of imagery dominate the opening vision of Ezekiel: images of motion and images of judgment. In contrast to Isaiah's static temple imagery, Ezekiel's vision is filled with movement. Whereas Isaiah saw the Lord seated in the temple, Ezekiel's vision opens with the Lord in the midst of a motion-filled "windstorm" (rûaḥ se ārā, Ezek. 1:4) in the land of the exiles. God is not dead or sleeping, nor is he restricted to the temple; on the contrary, he is living and active and on the move. The Lion of Judah is restless. In general, such a depiction of the Lord's coming to intervene in the lives of his people would be a positive development. However, in this case God's activity does not bode well for the temple or for Jerusalem. It is only a short step from Ezekiel 1, where the glory of God is in motion, to Ezekiel 10, where the glory abandons the temple, leaving it defenseless against the Babylonian invaders.

Movement dominates Ezekiel's description of the approach of a mighty windstorm. The windstorm itself is in motion, while the living creatures it contains not only have legs but wings as well. Torches are moving back and forth between the creatures (Ezek. 1:13), while alongside the creatures are various wheels, with each "wheel intersecting a wheel" (1:16). All of these

wheels move together and stop together under the control of "the spirit of the living creatures" (*rûaḥ haḥayyâ*, 1:20). Everywhere the prophet looks, he sees bustling activity.

What is more, the activity has ominous import. Ezekiel's vision, however bizarre it may seem to us, draws on a number of traditional ancient Near Eastern elements. The imagery of the Lord riding on the storm, surrounded by fire and lightning, was a common way of describing the coming of the divine warrior (see Ps. 18:9–14; Nah. 1:3). The wheels of Ezekiel's vision represent a chariot, another typical aspect of the divine warrior image. Frequently, the image of God as a warrior was adopted by the prophets to speak of the Lord's coming to deliver his people. In this instance, however, it is significant that the windstorm is coming "out of the north" (Ezek. 1:4), the traditional source of Judah's foes. The divine warrior is here approaching to wage war against his own people, not to deliver them. The covenant-breaking people can find no comfort in the imminent personal arrival of their God.

The Lord's throne-chariot is supported by living creatures, which are instantly recognizable as cherubim from their role as throne-bearers (cf. Ps. 18:10) and indeed are explicitly identified as such in Ezekiel 10:1. These extraordinary winged creatures have nothing to do with the rosy-cheeked, naked infants of popular mythology. They have four faces each—that of a man, a lion (the highest wild animal), an ox (the highest domestic animal), and an eagle (the highest bird)—symbolizing the fact that they embody within themselves all of the highest attributes of living creation. Thus they are appropriately called "living creatures."

As well as being God's throne-bearers, the cherubim are the guardians of God's holiness, God's heavenly bodyguard. The threatening nature of their presence comes from their role as enforcers of divine judgment. Thus, when the man and the woman were thrown out of the Garden of Eden, cherubim were appointed to bar the way back into God's presence, preventing any intrusion of the profane into the realm of God's holiness (Gen. 3:24).

In fact, in many respects the events of Genesis form the backdrop for Ezekiel's vision. The mighty windstorm recalls not only creation, where the Spirit $(r\hat{u}a\dot{h})$ of God was hovering over the waters (Gen. 1:2), but also the Flood, where God sent a wind $(r\hat{u}a\dot{h})$ to dry up the floodwaters (8:1). The connection with these two pivotal events of protohistory is underlined as the

chapter unfolds. We read about the living creatures (hayyôt; cf. Gen. 1:24, 28) and an awesome "expanse" (rāqîa'; Ezek. 1:25) over the cherubim, like that of Genesis 1:6. The aura of God's radiance is compared to a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day (Ezek. 1:28), which evokes Genesis 9:13–16. These references set the tone of Ezekiel as an account of creation-uncreation-recreation, similar to that of the early chapters of Genesis. They invite the first readers of the book to compare their own experience of exile with Adam and Eve's banishment from the Garden of Eden and with Noah's endurance of the Flood.

While the emphasis of Ezekiel 1 is almost exclusively on the gathering clouds that threaten rain, yet the mention of the rainbow (v. 28) allows the possibility of a ray of hope even in the midst of the gloom. That hope does not deny the possibility of judgment, any more than the rainbow denies the possibility of rain. Indeed, without the rain there could be no rainbow! What the rainbow asserts is the faithfulness of God even in the midst of overwhelming judgment. It is a sign of God's self-commitment to his promise. God's judgment must fall on his rebellious people, yet because of commitment to his covenant he will not wipe them out. In the darkness of exile, God's covenant faithfulness, his *ḥesed*, was Israel's only hope. Thus the writer of Lamentations, without in the least diminishing the nature of the calamity that had befallen his people, could say: "Because of the LORD's great love (*ḥasdê-yahweh*) we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lam. 3:22–23).

But where can one flee from this impending judgment of God? The message of the vision is that flight is useless. The throne-chariot can proceed as easily to any of the four points of the compass, without even having to turn, symbolizing God's omnipresence (Ezek. 1:12, 17). The wheels are covered with eyes, symbolizing the omniscience of God. As the prophet Jonah had earlier discovered, when God stirs the storm there is literally no place to run and nowhere to hide. In the face of such an awesome, ominous appearing of God, it is small wonder that Ezekiel fell on his face (1:28). The certain, unavoidable judgment of God is a terrifying spectacle to behold.

CALL NARRATIVE. Ezekiel's prophecy opens with a typical "call narrative," outlining the details of his commissioning to be a prophet (Ezek. 1:1–3:15; cf., e.g., Jer. 1). The prophetic call narrative was an important part of every prophecy. On the one hand, it served to give legitimacy to the prophet's words, for he spoke not on his own account but as an ambassador sent by the Great King, the Lord himself. In it, the prophet gave details of how he had been singled out for the prophetic office. On the other hand, the call narrative often introduced the themes that the prophecy would encompass in greater detail, just as the overture to a symphony introduces in brief form the musical motifs that will form the basis for the work to follow.

Thus, Ezekiel's vision begins the process of communicating God's judgment to Israel. Again, as with the introductory verses of Ezekiel's prophecy, it is easy to get drowned in the details. It is possible to get caught up in the complexities of creatures with legs and faces and wings, of coals and torches and lightning, of wheels within wheels. Such overattention to details can easily lead to allegorical interpretation, in which meaning is read into the text rather than out from the text. Rather, we must see how Ezekiel's vision of movement and impending divine judgment has a challenge for our day.

The challenge for our day. (1) God is not tied to the old ways of doing things. Just as Ezekiel's contemporaries put their trust in the temple rather than in the God of the temple, so also in our day there are many who place their faith in the gifts of God rather than in the Giver. The complacency of such people, then and now, needs to be challenged. The true and living God is not a tame God. He cannot be comfortably manipulated into a box and made to do our bidding. If he were, he would hardly be worthy of following. God's radical freedom to be God, bound only by his own selfrevelation, means that his ways can never be reduced to a pat formula or a trite slogan. If his people abandon him, he may abandon them and fight against them. A lady reputedly asked Abraham Lincoln during the dark days of the Civil War if he was confident that God was on their side. "Madam," he is said to have replied, "I am less concerned whether God is on our side than whether we are on his side." No matter what our past history, we cannot assume God is on our side unless we are constantly and faithfully on his side.

(2) To those tempted to place their hope in fallible earthly institutions, a warning note of judgment needs to be sounded. God's presence in the midst of his people is not always good news, for he is a holy God who will judge evil. He is still the divine warrior, who comes to establish justice without favoritism or partiality. That is bad news indeed to those who are counting on a comfortable continuance of the status quo. But, paradoxically, at the same time God's coming in judgment is still viewed as *good news* in the Bible. He comes not merely to punish the wicked but to establish his kingdom, news that is good indeed to those whose hope is firmly placed in him. No matter how black the gathering clouds may be, those who trust in the Lord will live in the light of his covenant faithfulness.

This same note of the danger of impending judgment on the complacent is struck in the New Testament analogue of Ezekiel's opening vision—that of the apostle John on Patmos (Rev. 1:10–20). The allusions to Ezekiel 1 in Revelation 1 include the terrifying images of blazing fire and glowing bronze, a human figure surrounded by radiance, and the noise of rushing waters. Like Ezekiel, John falls down at the feet of the glorious revelation of God (1:17). He is then commissioned with a message for the seven churches of Asia Minor, which combines judgment to come on the unrepentant with hope for those who persevere.

God is not merely a distant observer of our struggle, for he walks in the midst of the seven lampstands (Rev. 2:1). What is more, he is no respecter of tradition when it becomes merely the dead heritage of the past. He will remove the lampstand from the midst of those who have forsaken their first love. Only living and active faith will overcome all the trials that face people and enter into life (see Rev. 2:5–7). But those who are seeking to serve the Lord in the midst of many trials can take comfort from the powerful presence of the Lord in their midst. God knows their deeds (2:2; 3:1, 8, 15), their hard work and perseverance (2:2, 19), their afflictions and poverty, the slanders ranged against them (2:9), and the unique problems of where they live (2:13). Nothing escapes his observation—and now he is ready to act!

Contemporary Significance

THE REALITY OF JUDGMENT. The message of judgment is indeed never popular to proclaim. Some contemporary churches have completely removed any mention of sin and its consequences from their messages, on the grounds that it turns people away. One pastor recently described the goal of his church's "seeker services" in the following terms: "In a nonthreatening atmosphere, the 'seekers' share a delightful, thought-provoking hour in which they are introduced to the person of Jesus Christ."12 It is doubtful that Ezekiel would have described his encounter with the living God as "a delightful, thought-provoking hour"; the reality of God's presence created, on the contrary, a threatening atmosphere. It is never comfortable for sinners to stand in the presence of an angry God. But in exile, when all that has meaning and value is torn away, people do not seek entertainment but reality; what they require is not so much to have their thoughts provoked as to have their hard questions answered. Perhaps this is one reason why we find the book of Ezekiel so hard to grasp today in our Western culture, with our delusions of adequacy. We are more used to reading the Bible as a kind of self-help manual, which provides ten top tips for cultivating the roses in our spiritual garden.

But the world through which we walk is not a safe place. It is a wilderness walk, in which every turn of the road brings into view new challenges and dangers. It is a world where things break down and fall apart, even for the best of people. It is a world marred by sin—your own sins and the sins of others. Without a recognition of sin and the curse that lies on our world because of sin (Gen. 3:16–19), the brokenness of life does not make any sense. You are left with the dilemma that either God is good but not powerful enough to avert life's disasters, or that God is not good. The Bible shows us a third possibility: God is both good and all-powerful, but because of human sin the world is under God's curse.

That does not mean that *all* bad things happen because of our individual sins. Jesus rejected that solution in John 9:3 when he asserted of the man born blind, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned . . . but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." But it does mean that we have to reckon with a God who is just and holy as well as loving and compassionate, who judges in wrath as well as graciously forgives.

This is the God with whom Israel has to deal, and his character has not changed over the intervening centuries. God continues to act in judgment

on sin as well as to bring justice to the oppressed, even though only in a partial way in our present era. But into the situation of pain and anguish, of dislocation and alienation, even as it is revealed to be (in this case) the direct judgment of God's wrath, comes the trumpet sound of Ezekiel's prophecy: You are not alone. Surrounded by clouds that will bring a deluge on God's rebellious people, the rainbow still shines. God continues to reveal himself to his people in the exile that they merited for themselves. Indeed, in the situations of pain and anguish, the sound of his voice is often most clearly heard. We will not always like what he has to say, of course. His Word confronts us with our sin as well as comforts us with his grace. But the truly astonishing thing is that in spite of our sin, he still speaks to us and through us. There is no other word for that but grace.

The challenge to the church. But God's challenging Word comes not only to individuals but also to societies. The cities of Europe are filled with the great cathedrals and churches of past centuries, many of which are now empty. Some have been turned into mosques, others into restaurants or carpet showrooms, the symbols of a post-Christian society. Invariably, the way to such a post-Christian society lies through a contentment with the externals of religion, a society in which it is enough to have the form of godliness, while denying its power (2 Tim. 3:5). The church in Ephesus was warned that it had lost its first love and unless there was repentance, the church itself would cease to exist (Rev. 2:5). Coldness, if left untouched, leads to hardness and then deadness.

Yet this perilous condition may be present even while the externals are all in place; orthodox theology and activism in good works may continue long after love has grown cold (Rev. 2:2–4). Within a generation a similar fate could easily befall the churches of our cities. Only constant repentance and ever-renewed trust in the living God ensures continued life and usefulness for a church. We should therefore pray continually for the Spirit's life-giving power to be at work within our churches, lest our churches likewise become mere monuments to God's powerful work in the past.

There is no magic formula for measuring and maintaining the life of a church. The classic "marks of the church" formulated by the Reformers—the pure preaching of the Word and right celebration of the sacraments—certainly focus our attention on important issues, but they are both too broad and too narrow. They are *too narrow* insofar as they would refuse the

name "church" to many gatherings of our true brothers and sisters in Christ. After all, those who practice paedo-baptism and those who practice adult baptism cannot both be celebrating the sacrament rightly, yet there are many bodies of true believers on both sides of the argument. And these marks are *too broad* since they dignify with the term *church* some institutions that may have a form of external orthodoxy, yet lack genuine life. Love of doctrine is not enough, not even the love of true doctrine.

The one clear mark of true discipleship that the Lord himself instituted is love for one another (John 13:35). This trait, though perhaps hard to define quantitatively, yet is surely possible to recognize when experienced. It is the external evidence of the internal reality of eternal life, or, to put it another way, it is the primary fruit of remaining in living connection with Jesus (15:9–17). Of course, where that living connection is present, the other aspects of the fruit of the Spirit's work in our hearts will not be lacking either (Gal. 5:22–26).

It is not merely a challenge to the complacent to remember that God is not tied to the past. It is good news for his people. God is living and active and constantly doing new things. Should the existing structures of the church grow moribund and useless, he can and does raise up for himself new organizations and denominations to achieve his purposes. The coldness and deadness of the eighteenth-century Church of England may have seemed unpromising soil for a potent movement of God's Spirit, yet God caused George Whitefield and John Wesley to spring out of it as powerful witnesses to the truth of his Word. The encouragement and challenge to our contemporary churches is that the living God will achieve his purposes—with or without us!

Given that truth, Christians need to adopt a balance between progressivism and traditionalism. On the one hand, not everything that is new is of God. Christians need to be discerning in their evaluation of movements and trends within the church, measuring all things against the yardstick of the Scriptures. On the other hand, neither is everything new automatically suspect. Our understanding of the Scriptures and how they are to be applied to our present times is constantly growing as new challenges drive us back to reread old passages and reevaluate the traditions we have received from our forefathers in the faith.

Like Abraham Lincoln, we need to be constantly posing ourselves the question in every situation, "Am I on the Lord's side?" As we do so, may the Spirit convict us of our sins and point us afresh to Christ, the divine warrior who bore the full weight of God's wrath for us, so that we may experience the full light of his presence without being consumed.

Ezekiel 2:1–3:15

HE SAID TO ME, "Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you." ²As he spoke, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard him speaking to me.

³He said: "Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their fathers have been in revolt against me to this very day. ⁴The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says.' 5And whether they listen or fail to listen—for they are a rebellious house—they will know that a prophet has been among them. ⁶And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them or their words. Do not be afraid, though briers and thorns are all around you and you live among scorpions. Do not be afraid of what they say or terrified by them, though they are a rebellious house. You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious. ⁸But you, son of man, listen to what I say to you. Do not rebel like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you."

⁹Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, ¹⁰which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe.

^{3:1}And he said to me, "Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the house of Israel." ²So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat.

³Then he said to me, "Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it." So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.

⁴He then said to me: "Son of man, go now to the house of Israel and speak my words to them. ⁵You are not being sent to a people of obscure speech and difficult language, but to the house of Israel—⁶not to many peoples of obscure speech and difficult language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely if I had sent you to them, they would have listened to you. ⁷But the house of Israel is not willing to listen to you because they are not willing to listen to me, for the whole house of Israel is hardened and obstinate. ⁸But I will make you as unyielding and hardened as they are. ⁹I will make your forehead like the hardest stone, harder than flint. Do not be afraid of them or terrified by them, though they are a rebellious house."

¹⁰And he said to me, "Son of man, listen carefully and take to heart all the words I speak to you. ¹¹Go now to your countrymen in exile and speak to them. Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says,' whether they listen or fail to listen."

12Then the Spirit lifted me up, and I heard behind me a loud rumbling sound—May the glory of the LORD be praised in his dwelling place!—¹³the sound of the wings of the living creatures brushing against each other and the sound of the wheels beside them, a loud rumbling sound. ¹⁴The Spirit then lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness and in the anger of my spirit, with the strong hand of the LORD upon me. ¹⁵I came to the exiles who lived at Tel Abib near the Kebar River. And there, where they were living, I sat among them for seven days—overwhelmed.

Throughout history, mystics have sought to experience visions of God. They have often gone to great lengths in their pursuit of this ultimate experience, subjecting their bodies to innumerable hardships in order to attain to a great spiritual "high." They have traveled to the ends of the earth and undergone fastings, lack of sleep, isolation, self-denial, and self-flagellation in search of contact with the Divine. In contrast, God comes to Ezekiel entirely unsought and reveals himself to the prophet not for the sake of giving him the quiet time to end all quiet times but rather to commission him for a task and to entrust to him a message. The message that Ezekiel is to proclaim is not his own, but God's; for that reason, only God can empower him and authorize him to deliver it. On the most basic level, therefore, the call vision and commissioning serve to authenticate Ezekiel's ministry, both to himself and to his audience.

But in addition to that general authentication, the manner of the prophet's calling also speaks to his hearers of the task to which the prophet has been called. In Ezekiel's case, that task will not be an easy one. He has not been sent to the Gentiles, with whom the only problem in communicating his message would have been linguistic (Ezek. 3:4–6). Had he been sent to them, they would surely have listened, even though their speech was obscure and their language difficult (lit., "a people deep of lip and heavy of tongue," 3:5). Being a Wycliffe Bible translator would have been a straightforward assignment in comparison to what Ezekiel has been called to do.

Instead, Ezekiel is being sent to the Israelites, who are a "rebellious nation" (gôyim hammôredîm; Ezek. 2:3). Notice how the traditional language of election has been reversed here, so that the Gentiles have become 'am (a "people") while Israel has become gôyim ("nations"). The chosen nation has become, appropriate to their own action, unchosen. The depth of Israel's alienation from God further emerges in 3:11, where Ezekiel is sent to "your countrymen in exile." God is not willing to call them "my people," a sure sign of disaster to come. Nor is this state a temporary aberration on the part of this present generation but rather a continuation of a long history of disobedience. They are simply the "sons of Israel" (benê yis rā'ēl, 2:3), a term that brings out the hereditary nature of their rebelliousness: They are true children to their rebellious parents (2:3–4).

The essence of the people's transgression lies in their rebellion, that is, their refusal to recognize God's sovereignty over them. In that attitude they have hardened themselves, externally and internally, becoming "obstinate" and "stubborn" (Ezek. 2:4). Though language will not be a barrier, they will not listen to Ezekiel because they are not willing to listen to the One who sent him (3:7). If responsiveness is to be the measure of success, Ezekiel's mission is declared a failure before it even begins. But Ezekiel's mission will be judged by another standard, for even though the people will not listen to his words, yet "they will know that a prophet has been among them" (2:5). That is, when the predicted disasters befall Israel, they will recognize that God had previously warned them of what was about to happen.

The prophet himself is to provide an alternative model of behavior. Unlike Israel he is to listen to what the Lord says to him and not to rebel as they do (Ezek. 2:8). Throughout the vision, Ezekiel is the very picture of compliant obedience to the Word of God. When he comes face-to-face with the glory of God, he falls face down in humble submission (1:28); he is not obstinate in God's presence. When God speaks, he listens; when he is commanded to stand, he rises to his feet (2:1–2). However, this obedience comes not because of some special measure of holiness intrinsic to Ezekiel but because of an infusion of divine Spirit (*rûaḥ*; 2:2). The entry of the Spirit not only raises him to his feet but enables him to hear God's speech (2:2). God not only hands the scroll to Ezekiel, he causes him to eat it (3:2). He is the One who will strengthen Ezekiel to make him as tough as his opponents. When the vision and commissioning are over, the Spirit lifts Ezekiel up and deposits him among the exiles again, where he sits motionless. Without God's power, Ezekiel literally can do nothing.

This depiction of Ezekiel as the model of Spirit-infused submission suggests that there is more than one dimension to the Lord's characteristic address to Ezekiel as *ben-'ādām*, usually translated "son of man." This expression occurs over ninety times in Ezekiel, compared to a mere fourteen times in the rest of the Old Testament. As has often been recognized, this form of address sharply distinguishes Ezekiel from the Sovereign God and the divine beings of chapter 1; *ben-'ādām* marks him out as a mere mortal.⁶

But this expression may perhaps also mark him out from all of his contemporaries. They are the "sons of Israel" (benê yis rā'ēl, 2:3), the true descendants of the one whose nature was to strive with God (Gen. 32:28); Ezekiel, on the other hand, is literally designated "the son of Adam." Just as the first Adam received the breath of life from God (Gen. 2:7), so Ezekiel as "son of Adam" receives an infusion of divine Spirit (rûaḥ), which raises him, as it were, to renewed "life" by enabling him to obey. This unusual form of address may thus be an aspect of the creation theme we saw in Ezekiel 1. This re-creation theme emerges more clearly in the related passage in Ezekiel 37, where the coming of the Spirit (rûaḥ) into the skeletons brings new life to the dry bones, but what happens later for the community happens first of all here to the prophet. Ezekiel himself is to be the founding member of a new community, empowered by the infusion of the divine Spirit to a life of radical obedience.

Like the first Adam, Ezekiel faces a test of obedience that revolves around the idea of eating, though in his case he is to eat whatever the Lord commands him to (Ezek. 2:8) rather than to abstain from eating what the Lord prohibits. In another reversal of the original sin, what Ezekiel is given to eat is anything but "good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom" (Gen. 3:6); rather, it is a scroll covered on both sides with words of lament and mourning and woe (Ezek. 2:10). But though its appearance is unattractive, to the obedient eater it tasted "as sweet as honey" (3:3). Ezekiel's obedient consumption of the scroll is his only activity in an otherwise completely passive vision. By it, he is equipped as God's messenger to go and speak the unpalatable truth to his fellow exiles.

Yet the vision ends on what appears at first sight to be a discordant note in 3:14–15. The prophet who has been called, empowered, and equipped is found sitting down, overwhelmed, filled with feelings of anger. These verses underline, however, the dual nature of the prophet's task. On the one hand, he remains under "the strong hand of the LORD" and therefore begins to feel the feelings that the Lord has toward the people—feelings of wrath and anger (3:14). On the other hand, he sits among the exiles, living where they live, and thus sees the effects of God's wrath from the other side: the forthcoming overwhelming devastation of his people (3:15).

Ezekiel's proclamation is not delivered from the safety and comfort of an ivory tower but flows out of personal experience of the suffering of his people. Indeed, it may not be too strong to say that he has already ingested their suffering, in the form of the scroll covered with words of lament, mourning, and woe, just as in the temple ritual the priests would ingest the sin offering and thus absolve the guilt of the people. But in the absence of the temple, there is no sacrifice to take away the guilt of the people, only a scroll that records it. In the meantime, these feelings of wrath and desolation must remain inside the prophet until the Lord opens his lips and gives him the words to say (3:16).

Bridging Contexts

THE SPIRIT IN the old and new eras. In what ways is our task as messengers of the gospel similar to and different from that assigned to Ezekiel? In some ways, as New Testament Christians we live in a different era. The role of the Holy Spirit in particular changes radically from the Old Testament period to that of the New. In the Old Testament the Spirit is given to specific people to accomplish specific tasks, especially the ability to speak God's word to his people. The hope and expectation of a universal outpouring of the Spirit was there throughout the Old Testament, but it remained something for the future (Joel 2:28–29). In the New Testament era, however, the promise is fulfilled. The Spirit has been poured out on all of God's people, young and old, male and female, influential and insignificant alike, commissioning and equipping them for the prophetic task (see Acts 2). Thus, we now live in the age of "the prophethood of all believers."

In the book of Acts, a prominent theme is the fact that the coming of the Holy Spirit gives believers power to witness about Jesus Christ. As was the case for the prophet Ezekiel, the major impediment in that task is not merely linguistic (though the Holy Spirit deals with that problem as well in Acts 2:4!). It is the fact that we are trying to communicate the gospel to people who are "dead in . . . transgressions and sins" (Eph. 2:1). What people need is not simply new information but new life. The essence of human sin continues to be rebellion against God's sovereignty, a state in which people desire to suppress the truth about God (Rom. 1:18).

Whereas Ezekiel was called to bring this message to Israel, God's chosen people, we bring the message to the Gentiles as well. They too, though once "far away," now have access to the Father by the same Spirit that Israel does, as Paul reminds us in Ephesians 2:17–18. The process of bringing that gospel to the nations is often a painful one, however. God continues to use as his messengers not the strong but the weak, placing his treasure in clay pots to show that strength really belongs to him (2 Cor. 4:7). Like Ezekiel, we need to fall on our faces in God's presence, recognizing that we have no strength, no gifts, nothing that we can contribute to the task, and pleading with him to fill us with his Spirit so that we can be faithful servants. Like Ezekiel, we must be willing to die to ourselves and to our desires and comfort to be useful to God. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 4:5, hitting both themes of weakness and self-denial: "We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake."

The Son of Man. That ministry is ours because in the meantime the final "Son of Man" has come, Jesus Christ himself. He is The Human One in fullness, just as Ezekiel was a "mere human" in contrast to the exalted title used for God, "Sovereign LORD." But Jesus is also the heavenly Christ, the "one like a son of man"—picking up on the majestic imagery of Daniel 7, an exalted, regal figure (see Rev. 1:13). These two aspects seem at first sight incongruous, even contradictory. Yet that is why it was such a perfect title for Jesus to adopt for his incongruous mission. In his earthly ministry, it is the "mere humanity" aspect that is prominent. In Eugene Peterson's words, "this Son of Man has dinner with a prostitute, stops off for lunch with a tax-collector, wastes time blessing children when there were Roman legions to be chased from the land, heals unimportant losers and ignores high-achieving Pharisees and influential Sadducees." Ultimately, he hangs pierced and bleeding on a cross. He dies, the most human and radically undivine of acts.

But his majesty, while veiled, is still present in his earthly ministry. He teaches as one with authority, he speaks of possessing a kingdom. Both aspects are present because Jesus is son of man and Son of Man, very man and very God, taking on our humanity and combining it with undiminished deity. For the first disciples the lesson necessarily focused on his humanity because they had to learn that salvation comes not through the advent of a triumphal heavenly figure bearing a sword, blasting his opponents with fire from heaven, as James and John thought (Luke 9:54). Rather, it came

through the advent of a baby in a manger, who grew up to bear a crown of thorns and a cross. The "son of man" had come not (as you might expect from Dan. 7) to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

But for the hearers of the book of Revelation, the lesson is reversed. The return of our Lord will not be the same as his first advent. Christ is not eternally suffering on the cross, but will return (as the Son of Man!) in glory on the clouds, bearing a sword to blast his opponents with fire from heaven. James and John were not entirely wrong, they just had their advents confused; they mixed up the son of man and the Son of Man. The answer to both is "the son of man"—first in his state of humiliation and second in his state of exaltation; as the ancient liturgy puts it: "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again."

The human Christ of the crucifix, the son of man in his state of humiliation, is not all there is. According to Revelation 1, even now in his state of exaltation, the heavenly, exalted, glorious Christ rules and reigns. But he reigns in the middle of the seven golden lampstands, which are later identified as the seven churches. It may seem a strange location for the Glorious One, in the midst of seven small, undistinguished churches, tarnished by sin and weakness. Yet where else should we expect to see the One whose nursery was a cowshed and whose coronation ceremony took place on a cross? He is there in the midst of real, ordinary communities of faith—not idealized, sanitized versions—and he is there dressed in priestly garb, with kingly accouterments and the power of the prophetic word. He is there as prophet, priest, and king, on behalf of his people.

Jesus is also the Second Adam, who by his obedience undoes the effects of the first Adam's fall (Rom. 5:19; 1 Cor. 15:44–49). He is the one on whom the Spirit rested in fullness of power and through whom the Spirit is poured out on the church, to create the new community of his people. Jesus does not need to swallow the Word of God; he is himself the Word of God, the manifestation of the divine glory (John 1:14). He is the One who came to earth to preach good news to the poor (Luke 4:18); he is also the One who will return to earth to tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty (Rev. 19:15).

The imagery of scroll-swallowing reappears in Revelation 10, where the apostle John is told to eat a scroll that will turn his stomach sour, though, as

with Ezekiel, it had been sweet in his mouth. The ingested Word of God will provide him with the material to prophesy about many peoples, nations, languages, and kings (10:11); however, bearing such testimony is frequently a bittersweet experience, as the fate of the two witnesses in Revelation 11 indicates. To some, the message of the gospel is the aroma of life, sweeter than honey, while to others it is the aroma of death, to be opposed and destroyed (2 Cor. 2:16).

Contemporary Significance

CONTEMPORARY EVANGELISM. What do the models of Jesus and Ezekiel tell us about our efforts in evangelism and missions? In the first place, surely they challenge the common notion in the church that "bigger is always better." There is a lot of pressure from many quarters in our times to measure success in terms of numbers. Whether it is evangelistic crusades that speak of thousands of "decisions for Christ" or popular books that suggest that adopting certain methodologies will inevitably bring church growth, the "bigger is better" philosophy reigns in much of the contemporary church.

In support of this doctrine, the biblical image of the harvest is pressed into service. It is asserted on the one hand that the faithful Christian will inevitably be the fruitful Christian, seeing many people brought to Christ, and on the other hand that fruitfulness should determine strategy, so that the maximum number of harvesters are sent to where the fruit is ripe. On this approach, the primary goal of missions and evangelism is to see the world come to Christ.

The call of Ezekiel (and of some of the other prophets) should challenge this simplistic assumption. He is specifically called and sent to a people who have been unresponsive in the past and will be unresponsive in the future. Not only that, but God tells the prophet that if he had sent him to the Gentiles, a far greater response to his preaching would have occurred. The faithfulness of this man's ministry cannot be measured in numerical terms. The primary goal of his ministry is not to see people converted but to bring glory to God by preaching (and modeling) the message he has been given. As John Calvin put it: "When God wishes to move us to obey him, he does not always promise us a happy outcome to our labor; but sometimes he

wants to test our obedience to the point that he will have us be content with his command, even if people ridicule our efforts."¹⁶

That is not to say that we should adopt a kind of reverse psychology, whereby we assert that we must certainly be faithful if no one is being reached by our message! We must labor to the utmost of our ability to remove any stumbling block that stands in the way of communicating the gospel, becoming "all things to all men so that by all possible means [we] might save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). Yet we do so recognizing that a work of the Holy Spirit is necessary in the hearts of men and women if they are to become Christians, a work that is the sovereign prerogative of God to impart. At times, God opens the hearts of men and women to himself through the most unlikely of messengers, such as Jonah's concise and not exactly heartfelt preaching to the Ninevites (Jonah 3:4), while at other times the eloquent pleading of God's messengers falls on deaf ears.

This truth should be both a comfort and a challenge to us in our evangelism. On the one hand, sharing the gospel is far easier than we think. God is not limited by the weakness of my efforts; he can, if he chooses, save in spite of my incompetence. As one person put it, passing on the good news is simply a matter of one beggar telling another where to find bread. That should motivate us to witness boldly for Christ wherever we go. On the other hand, however, sharing the gospel is far harder than we think. Even the most brilliant performance on my part may still fail to convince my hearers, not because they are dense but because they are still "dead in . . . transgressions and sins" (Eph. 2:1). That should motivate us to pray far more passionately than we do for those around us—and around the world—who are not Christians.

The missionary task of the church. This perspective should also challenge much of our thinking on the missionary task of the church. Were those pioneer missionaries who died within days or weeks of arriving on the mission field wasting their lives, because they saw no one converted? Are those who today labor for many years in the difficult areas of the Middle East or Japan, while seeing only a handful of converts, operating in the wrong place? If the primary goal of missions is to see the world converted, then the answer to both questions is yes. But if the primary goal of missions is the same as the goal set before Ezekiel—faithfulness to the task to which one has been called, no matter what the consequences, so that God may be

glorified—then the answer is different. In biblical perspective, reaching the world is only the secondary goal of missions, behind the primary goal of bringing glory to God through faithful obedience.¹⁷

We are, after all, followers of the Son of Man, who came to his own and his own did not receive him (John 1:11). Yet to all those who did receive him, and to all those who will receive him through our proclamation, he gives the right to become children of God (1:12). In this obedient mission, he brings glory to the Father's name (12:27–29).

In order to carry through such a ministry where there is little success in the eyes of the world, a strong sense of calling is essential. Why should we preach the gospel to those who stubbornly refuse to hear? Because God has called and sent us, and he has the right as our Sovereign King to use us as he sees fit. He is not only the One who calls us to the task and strengthens us for it; ultimately he alone is the One whom we are seeking to please. Thus, in Isaiah 49, when the Servant of the Lord struggled with the idea, "I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing," his reply to himself was, "Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand, and my reward is with my God" (49:4). The Puritan William Greenhill comments:

Sometimes God gives large encouragement, promises, hope, success, providing for our infirmities; at other times a bare commission and command must suffice to do that which would make one's heart ache: it is his prerogative to send whom he will, and upon what service he will.¹⁸

The role of the Spirit. Moreover, to fulfill that service we must be people of the Spirit and people of the book. Ezekiel could not even stand up without the Spirit's empowerment, yet we frequently feel able to preach sermons, counsel the struggling, comfort the dying, and equip the saints for ministry in our own strength—or at least we act as if we do. When we neglect to pray in order to get out and do, we are proclaiming a practical theology of self-reliance, whatever our theological formulations may be. It is striking that seminaries typically have few courses teaching future ministers of the gospel about prayer compared to those instructing them

how to preach or how to witness. Is it any wonder, then, that we frequently turn out pastors who have not learned how to wait patiently upon the Lord and to seek his Spirit's power?

Such pastors, in turn, naturally preach more sermons to their congregations on the importance of witnessing than they do on the centrality of prayer. The result is that our churches are frequently intensely busy places, but the busyness is ours, not Christ's. Christians need to remember that they are founding members of the new Spirit-filled community—or, more precisely, that Christ, the new Adam, is the founding member into whose community the Spirit builds us. This means that our greatest need is not for us to be more active but for the Spirit to be more active in and through us.

Yet that Spirit does not come to draw attention to himself. The Spirit's work is always to bring Christ to bear on a person's life (cf. John 16:15). That is why Christians are always people of the book. They are those who have ingested the Word of God in its written form, from which comes their message for the world. That is why our pastors, like the first apostles, need to be freed up from other responsibilities, such as waiting on tables (and serving on committees?), so that they can devote themselves to the ministry of the Word and to prayer (Acts 6). The world may listen—or it may not. It is the Spirit's prerogative to open and close the doors to the hearts of men and women. But wherever they go, God's people are witnesses to the truth about God, revealed in his Word and declared in the power of the Spirit.

Ezekiel 3:16–27

At the end of seven days the word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁷"Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. ¹⁸When I say to a wicked man, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. ¹⁹But if you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin; but you will have saved yourself.

²⁰"Again, when a righteous man turns from his righteousness and does evil, and I put a stumbling block before him, he will die. Since you did not warn him, he will die for his sin. The righteous things he did will not be remembered, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. ²¹But if you do warn the righteous man not to sin and he does not sin, he will surely live because he took warning, and you will have saved yourself."

²²The hand of the LORD was upon me there, and he said to me, "Get up and go out to the plain, and there I will speak to you." ²³So I got up and went out to the plain. And the glory of the LORD was standing there, like the glory I had seen by the Kebar River, and I fell facedown.

²⁴Then the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet. He spoke to me and said: "Go, shut yourself inside your house. ²⁵And you, son of man, they will tie with ropes; you will be bound so that you cannot go out among the people. ²⁶I will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth so that you will be

silent and unable to rebuke them, though they are a rebellious house. ²⁷But when I speak to you, I will open your mouth and you shall say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says.' Whoever will listen let him listen, and whoever will refuse let him refuse; for they are a rebellious house."

Original Meaning

At the END of Ezekiel's seven-day waiting period (3:16), the prophet receives a further communication from God. His prophetic commissioning continues in two sections. The first outlines his responsibility as a "watchman for the house of Israel" (3:17–21), while the second unfolds further the limitations that his calling will place on him as he becomes, literally, the mouthpiece of God (3:24–27). The intervening reprise of the vision of chapter 1 in 3:22–23 ties these two sections together with the opening call vision, a link underlined by the common themes of "the hand of the LORD" (3:22; cf. 3:14), the appearance of "the glory of the LORD" (3:23; cf. 1:28), and the Spirit's setting Ezekiel on his feet.

The idea of the prophet as a "watchman" is a familiar one in the Old Testament (see Isa. 56:10; Jer. 6:17; Hos. 9:8). A watchman was someone appointed as a lookout to provide the people with advance warning of the coming of an enemy so that they could run to shelter (Ezek. 33:2–3). It was the Old Testament equivalent of the Second World War's "Air Raid Warden," the person who sounded the alarm as bombers approached so that the people could flee to the safety of the shelters. In this case, the "enemy" of whom the people have to beware is none other than God himself!

By giving Ezekiel the revelation of chapter 1, where as we saw, the Lord is depicted as the divine warrior coming from the north to judge his people, Ezekiel has been shown the reality of judgment to come. That vision was not given to him for his own personal edification but in order to share it with others. His mission is a matter of life or death. To those who heed his warning of judgment, it will be a message of life; to those who refuse him, it will be a message of death. In either case, his responsibility is the same: to sound the warning note clearly so that he discharges his own obligation. Otherwise, he too will share in the judgment.

The focus of the present passage is not so much on the change that may be wrought in individuals who hear his message, but on the responsibility laid on Ezekiel to preach to all, regardless of their response. The situations proposed ("When I say to a wicked man 'You will surely die . . .'"; "When a righteous man turns from his righteousness and does evil . . .") are purely hypothetical: Ezekiel is not thereby commissioned to the pastoral care of individual souls.² Rather, the two classes of people, the "wicked" and the "righteous," are all-encompassing. Just as a watchman has to shout his message of danger to everyone in the city, so also Ezekiel must address his message of judgment to all, whether righteous or wicked, and whether they listen or fail to listen (cf. Ezek. 2:7).³ Thus, 3:17–21 does not expand the scope of Ezekiel's ministry beyond what is already required of him in 2:7, where the Lord told him: "You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious." What it does is set before him clearly the consequences of any failure to fulfill his responsibilities.

For each class of hearers, righteous or wicked, there are the same two potential outcomes to Ezekiel's preaching: Either they hear and respond and live, or they ignore Ezekiel's message and perish. Those who respond faithfully to his proclamation will "live," a term describing not merely physical life but rather the fullness of relationship with the Sovereign Lord that flows from obedience. Death, on the other hand, means estrangement from both God and the covenant community. To be cut off from God's people is to be "dead," even while physically still alive, for one is separated from the source of life. Indeed, cut off from the Promised Land and the temple, many of the exiles presumed themselves to be effectively "dead" (cf. 37:12).

However, in the message given to Ezekiel the wicked are not closed out from life by their present status; there is still time to hear the word of the prophet and turn and live. Similarly, the righteous cannot presume on their status. They too must listen to the word of the prophet in order to live. In other words, what marks the righteous out from the wicked, what marks out those who "live" from those who "die," is the fact that they listen to the word of the Lord through the prophet and respond to it. The wicked are wicked precisely because they do not change their ways in response to the prophetic message, whereas the righteous heed the warning and receive life.

Here again, as in Ezekiel 2, Ezekiel himself is the model of what he prophesies. For whether he himself lives or dies depends on his "righteousness"—his faithfulness to the commission he has received. If he obeys the word of the Lord to him and proclaims his warning, then he will live. If he disobeys and fails to give a warning, then the blood of those whom he failed to warn will be required at his hand—in other words, he too will die.⁵ Ezekiel's commission is thus an equivalent test for this "son of Adam" to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil for the first Adam (Gen. 2:17). Having swallowed the scroll—for unlike the first Adam, Ezekiel is commanded to eat—Ezekiel is able to speak God's word, which distinguishes between good and evil. If he is faithful in his submissive obedience, he will himself live and will bring the possibility of life to those who hear and obey the message that comes through him. But if he fails, he and his hearers "will surely die" (Ezek. 3:18; cf. Gen. 2:17).

The depth of the prophet's self-emptying becomes apparent in Ezek. 3:24–27. Once again, he is confronted with a vision of God's glory, similar to what he saw before, in response to which he falls to the ground. When he is placed on his feet by an infusion of the divine Spirit, Ezekiel is ordered to remain confined to his house and told that he will be dumb (3:24–26). The completeness of his captivity is underlined by the three different pronouns used in verses 24–26. The prophet is told, "Go, shut *yourself* inside your house. And you, son of man, *they* will tie with ropes. . . . *I* will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth." Had his isolation been self-inflicted, he could have ended it when he chose; had it been inflicted by others, he could perhaps have escaped. But since it is placed on him by himself, by others, and by God, there is no escape.

The nature of the prophet's isolation will be twofold: He is to be confined to his house and he will lose his power of free speech. He is God's prisoner, a situation vividly depicted by the ropes that bind him.⁷ Even his tongue is God's prisoner, bound to the roof of his mouth, except when God frees it to speak his oracles.⁸ His dumbness is not total; he is still able to warn of the danger to come, as he has been commissioned to do in 3:17–21. But his speech is totally restricted to the reproduction of God's words of judgment—the words of lament, warning, and woe inscribed on the scroll he has swallowed.⁹

This restriction on the prophet's speech will make him unable to function as a mediator ('iš môkîaḥ, 3:26; NIV, "to rebuke"; lit., "an arbitrating man") for the house of Israel.¹⁰ He may not intercede for the people, nor may he seek the Lord on the people's behalf. The time for appeals for mercy is past; the appeals process is exhausted. The prophet's role, at least up until the fall of Jerusalem, is restricted to the delivery of the divine sentence of judgment: "This is what the Sovereign LORD says." Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear those words (3:27).

Bridging Contexts

WE ARE USED to thinking of the offices of priest and prophet in the neat and tidy categories of systematic theology. Thus, Louis Berkhof is expressing a widely held view when he states: "The prophet was appointed to be God's representative with the people, to be His messenger and to interpret His will. . . . The priest, on the other hand, was man's representative with God."

In our society, when we think of a "prophetic figure," we think of a wild-eyed man, delivering a message from God in thundering tones regardless of how it is received. In fact, both offices normally had a two-way function. The priest, just as much as the prophet, was the interpreter and teacher of God's will, while the prophet, just as much as the priest, was the representative of the people, interceding with God on their behalf.¹² Because Ezekiel's ministry fits our preconceptions of what a prophetic ministry "ought" to look like, we may fail to see how unusually restricted he is in his prophetic calling. Further, just as not everyone is called to be a prophet, so not every prophet is called to exercise his ministry in the way Ezekiel did. That means that we will have to be careful in universalizing the principles of Ezekiel's calling.

On the other hand, the very strangeness of Ezekiel's behavior tends to make it difficult for us to bridge the gap. Not a few people have sought, if not to tie Ezekiel up with ropes, at least to place a straightjacket on him, arguing that he suffered from dangerous psychoses. Placed on the psychiatrist's couch, Ezekiel is then analyzed and diagnosed as having suffered extreme problems in his relationship with his mother, probably in addition to serious childhood sexual abuse.¹³ To those without a relationship

with the living God, the idea of someone giving oneself over completely to become God's slave will inevitably seem nonsensical or abhorrent, the sign of certain mental disorder.

Yet though Ezekiel's obedience required of him harder and stranger tasks than those who preceded him, his basic orientation was simply that expressed by the prophet Isaiah: "Here am I. Send me!" (Isa. 6:8). Similarly, the apostle Paul persisted in his calling to ministry to the Gentiles in spite of the catalog of hardships he faced (2 Cor. 6:4–10) and the settled conviction from the Holy Spirit that this would always be the way of ministry for him (Acts 20:23). Though his life was dogged by "a thorn in [my] flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7), he had the confidence to pour out his life in the service of God, assured that no matter what happened to him, the gospel was not chained (2 Tim. 2:9). Such total self-sacrifice in the cause of the gospel is undoubtedly rare in our day and age and might well be considered a sign of mental imbalance by psychoanalysts, but we are all the poorer for its absence.

But why is the prophet thus constrained? On the one hand, his bonds bind him even more closely to the exiles, for whom "bondage" was a typical image of their fate (Isa. 49:9; 61:1). On the other hand, it serves as a real restriction on his proclamation. He may not go where he wishes to go or speak what he wishes to speak. There is no room in his life for any spirit of independence or for any involvement with lesser tasks. He is entirely shut up to his fate as God's mouthpiece, proclaiming as a watchman the warning of impending judgment, but unable in any way to avert it.

Contemporary Significance

Our CALLING. Recently, as my wife and I were driving along the highway, we saw a hand-made road-side sign that read, "Repent, the end is nigh!" Our first thought was to wonder if there was some unseen road hazard ahead into which we were about to run! Perhaps around the corner the road simply ran off the edge of a cliff! That slogan has been so overused as the butt of jokes that it is hard, even for us as Christians, to take its message seriously. It seems old-fashioned and out of date. Nowadays, we are far more likely to say to people whom we wish to reach for Christ: "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life," or, "Do you know for sure that

you are going to heaven when you die?" We like to focus on the "good news" aspect of the gospel.

Yet Ezekiel's calling, at least during the first part of his ministry, is to be the bringer of bad news, the news of impending judgment. The people need to know that God's patience with them is running out and the ax is about to fall. So great is God's determination to judge their sin that Ezekiel is not even allowed to act as mediator between God and Israel, seeking to bring the two parties together. Though it may have seemed for generations that God's mercy and his love towards Israel was such that he would never judge them, now that the sentence has been pronounced it will fall so swiftly and terribly that it may seem as if God will never again be merciful. Ezekiel would certainly have agreed with the writer to the Hebrews when he wrote, "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31). In order that the people may know that this is not just a random event but the bringing of the covenant curses on his rebellious people, God calls Ezekiel to be his prophet and to act as watchman for the people.

We said above that not all are called to fulfill the distinctive kind of prophetic ministry to which Ezekiel was called; yet as Christians, we too have a calling from God. According to Paul, we share in the work of reconciliation that God is doing in the world: "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us" (2 Cor. 5:20). We are God's messengers, just as the Old Testament prophets were, taking God's Word to the world. The Spirit of God that inspired the prophets now indwells us; only instead of swallowing a scroll, as Ezekiel did, we imbibe a book, the Bible, through whose pages God continues to speak to his people and to the world. This is the message we have been given to communicate and to which we are confined. Though we may be creative in the way we communicate the message, we are not free to be creative in the content of the message that we are to deliver.

God's message to the world. God's message to the world contains both good news and bad news. Naturally, we prefer to tell people good news. After all, which job would you prefer: to be the one who goes around telling people they have won millions in the lottery, or the bailiff who goes around telling the bankrupt person he is here to take away one's possessions?

The first challenge that this passage presents to you and me, then, is to present a balanced picture of who God is and who we are in relation to God. We must tell people that by nature, we are in rebellion against God and objects of his wrath (Eph. 2:3); we are darkened in our minds, separated from the life of God and hardened in our hearts (4:18), sinners deserving eternal death (Rom. 6:23). Indeed, the bad news of the Bible is far worse than the average person believes. Forget the problems of global warming and the world economy; left to ourselves we face the certainty of eternal judgment. The bailiff is at the door, waiting to strip God's rebellious subjects of even the few possessions they have and drive the unrepentant out into outer darkness.

But the good news of the gospel is also far better than the average person believes. Some churches have spent so much time proclaiming hellfire and damnation that they never got around to the positive message of the gospel. God loved the world so much that he stepped into the midst of our rebellion to bring about reconciliation. By his great love and rich mercy, he has intervened on our behalf in Jesus Christ, transferring us out of the family of the evil one and into the family of God. Jesus went to the cross to make our bad news his, and the good news concerning him ours. Through his death he not only paid off the debts that would have forced our bankruptcy, but he also endowed us with all spiritual riches through his perfect life. The gospel is thus both good news and bad news for the world, and we are called to proclaim both clearly.

We are also called to bring the news to everyone, without distinction. Ezekiel was not to seek out a congenial audience of the righteous, who might be expected to give his message a fair hearing. He was to proclaim it to righteous and wicked alike and to let God sort them out. The watchman must proclaim his message to everyone, without distinction. Like the sower in the parable of the soils (Matt. 13:1–23), Ezekiel was to scatter his seed all over the field.

Here too there is a challenge to you and me. We tend to sort our friends and family into "likely prospects" and "hard cases," focusing our efforts on those who we think are most likely to listen. But who are you to say that one person is more likely to listen than another? The Bible is full of "hard cases" who have come to faith in Christ, like the apostle Paul, formerly the great persecutor of the church. Equally, it records the cases of those who are

"not far from the kingdom," like the rich young ruler (Matt. 19:16–22), who turn and walk away. Thus, our calling as watchmen is not to engage in endless soil analysis so that we can deliver the gospel with pinpoint accuracy to those who we think are ready to receive it. Rather, we are to be faithful shouters of the Word, proclaiming the good news and bad news faithfully into the lives of all those around us.

Suggestions for ministry in our day. To my mind this is one of the advantages of what may be considered the rather old-fashioned practice of taking the gospel from door-to-door in the neighborhood of the church. Almost no other form of witnessing enables you to meet such a complete cross section of the community who live next door to you. Not everyone, of course, will appreciate your efforts: To those being saved the gospel is the aroma of life, while to those who are perishing it is the stench of death (2 Cor. 2:15–16). The four kinds of soil that receive the seed in the parable of the sower display the differences of their nature by their responses. The result of the sower's sowing is not that the whole field bursts into fruitfulness, but that the good soil bears fruit. As with Ezekiel, some will hear your message gladly and turn and live; others will fail to hear your message and consequently will die. But at least they will never be able to claim that no one loved them enough to tell them about Jesus.

For the preacher, this kind of door-to-door witness has the added advantage of bringing you face-to-face with real people and their real objections to the gospel. In consequence, if you are willing to listen to what these men and women tell you of their struggles, you will not be so likely to waste your sermons answering objections with which no one wrestles. Instead, you will have a store of real-life questions to answer from the Scriptures in a way that rings true to people in the pew, who are frequently far more in tune with their non-Christian neighbors than their pastors are.

The perseverance of the saints. Moreover, the good soil continues to bear fruit. The distinction between the righteous and wicked, between good soil and bad soil, is not a matter of past history but of inward response to the Word. It doesn't make any difference whether you have lived a notorious life of sin or have been a pillar of the Sunday school all your days; what counts to God is your response to his Word. Do you receive the gospel, turning away from your sins and trusting in what Jesus has done for you on the cross as your only hope in life and death? Do you accept fully

the bad news, that you are indeed a sinner, by nature a rebel against God, deserving of eternal judgment? Do you delight in God's righteousness and holiness, which is too pure to coexist with sin? Do you see the good news of the gospel not only as a good idea in general, but personally good news for you? Is your present trust not in any goodness of your own, but solely in the righteous life and atoning death of Jesus as your substitute? That is the key test of whether you are a Christian.

Nor can we make premature assessments of where others stand. It is possible for the seemingly righteous to fall and the defiantly wicked to repent, just as it is possible for the seed that sprang up quickly to wither through the absence of depth of soil or being choked by thorns. In high school, I helped lead a Christian club with two other young men, both of whom seemed at the time far more committed in their love for the Lord than I. One of them is now a pillar in his church, still passionately devoted to following the Lord; the other has not, to my knowledge, darkened the door of a church in years. To be righteous in the Old Testament means to be in right relationship with God; this is not something that can be stored up for a rainy day, but must be a constantly renewed reality. Thus the biblical doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is not a kind of cosmic ski lift, which once you are seated carries you all the way to your destination without effort. Rather, it is the truth that those who are indeed saints will actually persevere.

God's preservation of the saints. The reverse side of that doctrine is its partner, the preservation of the saints. This encourages believers that what counts in our persevering is not our weak grip on our heavenly Father, but his strong grasp on us. This twofold combination of human responsibility and divine assurance is brought out clearly in 2 Timothy 2:19. There Paul, having mentioned the apostasy of Hymenaeus and Philetus, concludes: "God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: 'The Lord knows those who are his,' and, 'Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.' " So the saints are those who persevere to the end, but they do so because of God's preservation.

This is good news for the weak sinners that we are. As I write this, I am shortly to go to a church where I will meet with an elder, a man I love and respect, who has abandoned his family and gone off with another woman. He knows that what he has done is wrong, but does not seem to know

whether it can be put right. The good news of the preservation of the saints is that even those who have made shipwreck of their faith can be rescued and brought safely home to their heavenly Father. The Lord knows those who are his, and even in their attempts to flee from him, they cannot escape his loving embrace. I hope to be able to tell this man that those whom God loves, he will not let go.

But to be such a channel of God's good and bad news is often a costly, self-denying business. If you say to God, "Here am I, send me," frequently he will! Sometimes, God sends his children to be his witnesses in uncomfortable situations—whether halfway around the world, to preach to villagers in Irian Jaya, or round the corner, to speak God's word in the jungles of corporate America. Such total yieldedness to God will often be regarded as certifiably foolish, or perhaps even worse, by a world that does not know God, especially when there seems little fruit to show for the sacrifice. But who is really the one being unwise? Jim Elliot, who met his death at the hands of the Auca Indians with whom he had planned to share the gospel, once wrote in his journal: "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose." ¹⁶

Our example in all of this is the self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Was Ezekiel confined to his house? Jesus was "despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering" (Isa. 53:3). Was Ezekiel made dumb? Jesus was "led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (Isa. 53:7). Was Ezekiel bound with ropes? Jesus was nailed to the cross and suffered there not for any transgressions of his own but for ours. The shackles of death designed for our wrists were placed on his. Thus has the greater "Son of Man" fulfilled the ministry of the earlier "son of man," giving us the good news of the gospel, which is the antidote to the bad news of our natural state. What price, then, can be too great for us to play our part in the great work of the triune God, bringing to himself a harvest of men and women from every tribe, nation, and language group, that they too might receive eternal life in Christ Jesus?

Ezekiel 4

Now, son of Man, take a clay tablet, put it in front of you and draw the city of Jerusalem on it. ²Then lay siege to it: Erect siege works against it, build a ramp up to it, set up camps against it and put battering rams around it. ³Then take an iron pan, place it as an iron wall between you and the city and turn your face toward it. It will be under siege, and you shall besiege it. This will be a sign to the house of Israel.

⁴"Then lie on your left side and put the sin of the house of Israel upon yourself. You are to bear their sin for the number of days you lie on your side. ⁵I have assigned you the same number of days as the years of their sin. So for 390 days you will bear the sin of the house of Israel.

⁶"After you have finished this, lie down again, this time on your right side, and bear the sin of the house of Judah. I have assigned you 40 days, a day for each year. ⁷Turn your face toward the siege of Jerusalem and with bared arm prophesy against her. ⁸I will tie you up with ropes so that you cannot turn from one side to the other until you have finished the days of your siege.

9"Take wheat and barley, beans and lentils, millet and spelt; put them in a storage jar and use them to make bread for yourself. You are to eat it during the 390 days you lie on your side. ¹⁰Weigh out twenty shekels of food to eat each day and eat it at set times. ¹¹Also measure out a sixth of a hin of water and drink it at set times. ¹²Eat the food as you would a barley cake; bake it in the sight of the people, using human excrement for fuel." ¹³The LORD said, "In this way the people of Israel will eat defiled food among the nations where I will drive them."

¹⁴Then I said, "Not so, Sovereign LORD! I have never defiled myself. From my youth until now I have never eaten anything found dead or torn by wild animals. No unclean meat has ever entered my mouth."

¹⁵"Very well," he said, "I will let you bake your bread over cow manure instead of human excrement."

¹⁶He then said to me: "Son of man, I will cut off the supply of food in Jerusalem. The people will eat rationed food in anxiety and drink rationed water in despair, ¹⁷for food and water will be scarce. They will be appalled at the sight of each other and will waste away because of their sin.

Original Meaning

IN EZEKIEL 1–3, we saw how the prophet was called and commissioned to bring a message to his people. There were hints throughout that the message, when it came, would not be good news. The Lord appeared in the form of the divine warrior, ready to deliver judgment, and he came from the north, like Israel's traditional enemies. In the face of this impending danger, Ezekiel was appointed as a watchman, to cry out a warning of the wrath to come. But just how bad is the bad news? The full extent of the bad news begins to become clear in the first message Ezekiel is given to deliver to the exiles (chs. 4–5), which is made up of a series of related symbolic actions, or "sign-acts," along with their explanation.

The first of Ezekiel's sign-acts symbolizes the siege of the city of Jerusalem and the reason for it. He is to take a clay brick (perhaps the size of one or two sheets of standard 8–1/2" x 11" paper), and draw on it a map or picture of Jerusalem. Having created this visual model, he was to "lay siege to it" (4:1–2). The extent of the depiction of the siege with its accompanying siege works, ramps, army camps, and battering rams seems to have a deliberate element of overkill in it; clearly this was no halfhearted effort but the extension of the entire might of the Babylonian army to crush errant Jerusalem.

Yet something more is at work in the onslaught than Babylonian imperialism. In Ezekiel's depiction, the invisible aggressor who stands behind the Babylonians becomes visible. Acting the part of the Lord, Ezekiel is to set up a large iron plate between himself and the city (4:3), symbolizing the cutting off of relationships between God and his people. There is now no channel by which the people can communicate with God, even if they wanted to do so.²

In the previous chapter, the prophet had been told that he would not be able to act as an intercessor for the people; the appeals process had been exhausted. This is now visually depicted. The prophet is told to "turn [his] face toward" Jerusalem (4:3), adopting an implacable attitude toward it. The iron wall and Ezekiel's expression communicate God's abandonment of the city (cf. chs. 8–11), and the dual agency of destruction (human and divine) emerges in 4:3: "It will be under siege, and you shall besiege it." The catastrophe will not simply be an event of human history ("It will be under siege") but specifically the result of direct divine action ("You [i.e., the prophet, representing the Lord] shall besiege it"). By his pantomime, Ezekiel is to make the invisible aggressor visible.

At this point the sign changes to a new, though related figure, in which the prophet shifts into the role of siege victim. This sign-act is more complex than the previous one, not so much in terms of the act described, which is straightforward enough,3 but of interpretation. The prophet is instructed to lie first on his left side for 390 days, "bear[ing] the sin [tis's'ā' 'et-'awonām] of the house of Israel," then to lie on his right side for forty days, "bear[ing] the sin of the house of Judah" (4:4–6). While in a prone position, he is to continue to prophesy against Jerusalem (4:7), and he is to subsist on siege rations (4:9–17). The latter is a near-starvation diet, a mere eight ounces per day of an unpalatable mixture of grains and legumes, along with two-thirds quart of water (4:9-11). According to Moshe Greenberg, the strange mixture symbolizes a situation where the scarcity was such that no one kind of grain was plentiful enough on its own to make a whole loaf. He also records an interesting experiment carried out in the third century A.D. that apparently demonstrated that even a dog would not eat Ezekiel's bread!4

Not only were the rations small and unappetizing, Ezekiel was further instructed (at first) to prepare them by baking them over human excrement,

a way that would have rendered him ceremonially unclean—representing the unclean food that the Israelites would eat in exile. This would be particularly abhorrent to a priest like Ezekiel. However, in response to Ezekiel's protest, the Lord permitted the prophet to substitute animal dung as the fuel.

What are we to make of this strange activity? There are several interconnected exegetical difficulties here. (1) Who is intended by "the house of Israel" and the "house of Judah"? In the context of the remainder of the Old Testament, one thinks immediately of the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah, which split apart during the reign of Rehoboam. Is that their meaning here? (2) What does it mean for the prophet to "bear their sin" (nās'ā' 'awōnām)? This can mean either "bear their guilt"—as the priests were said to "bear the iniquity" of Israel and thus atone for them (cf. Ex. 28:38; Lev. 10:17)—or it can mean "undergo punishment" (as in Num. 14:33, where Israel must "suffer for [their] unfaithfulness" [lit., "bear your punishment"] for forty years). (3) Finally, what is the significance of the time periods, 390 days and forty days respectively, which are said to represent periods of years?

In answer to the first question, though Ezekiel can speak of the northern and southern kingdoms in terms of "Israel" and "Judah" (see, e.g., Ezek. 37), this is not his normal practice. Moreover, if we adopt this approach, we run into insuperable difficulties when we attempt to interpret the time periods. Rather, for Ezekiel the "house of Israel" is the whole covenant people of God, and their sins are centered in the Jerusalem temple, the heart of the southern kingdom. Their 390-year history of sin, pictured by the prophet's 390-day prostration on his left side, stretches back in time to around the construction of the first temple. Likewise, the "house of Judah" appears here to be a designation for the community of the exiles in Ezekiel.

When we combine this approach with the dual significance of the phrase "bear their sin," the following interpretation emerges: Ezekiel is to lie on his left side for 390 days, representing 390 years, bearing the guilt of the entire covenant community of Israel. The iniquity of the community is placed on him (4:4). During this period he symbolizes Israel's long history of accumulated sin, which culminates in the siege and fall of Jerusalem, concretely depicted by eating siege rations throughout the 390 days (4:9). Then during the period of forty days, he represents the punishment of the

Exile, which he depicts in terms of the symbolic figure of forty years. Just as Israel's ancestors in the desert were a lost generation, spending forty years in the desert for their sin (Num. 14:34), so the exilic generation is condemned to a similar fate for the nation's long history of sin. 10

It is clear that Ezekiel's "bearing sin" for the people has no substitutionary purpose. The siege and destruction of Jerusalem are not averted by his sufferings. Thus, throughout his period of prostration he is to continue prophesying against Jerusalem with bared forearm and set face (Ezek. 4:7). The purpose of his action is to illustrate the accumulation of the people's sin rather than to be effective in removing that sin. In this respect, his action is comparable to the whole Old Testament sacrificial system, which, according to the writer to the Hebrews, could not effectively remove sin (Heb. 10:1–11), but rather served as "an illustration for the present time" (9:9). By this means, Ezekiel is to communicate graphically to the people the weight of the accumulated burden of their history of sin as the cause for the impending conflagration of Jerusalem and the exile of the people in a land not their own. The punishment for that sin is coming upon them with full force, no matter what the optimistic false prophets may be saying (Jer. 6:14; 8:11).

But, as with the opening vision, at the end of the judgment a glimmer of hope surfaces. Though the tunnel may be long and dark, there is a tiny light at its end. For the total number of days of the sign-act is 430, a number that parallels Israel's years of sojourn in Egypt (Ex. 12:40). Judgment must come, a judgment that effectively wipes out the entire present generation, just as the desert generation was wiped out. Yet by depicting the total period of sin and judgment in terms of a renewed Egyptian bondage, the prophet invites the hope, even the certainty, that at the end of the appointed time of punishment there will be a new exodus and a new entry into the land." Forty years may be a long time—a lifetime—for Ezekiel's hearers. But God's abandonment of his people is not forever. The rainbow continues to shine through the gathering gloom.

Ezekiel's diet during this period has a twofold aspect: As indicated above, the rations are small and poor quality, symbolizing the siege diet of the people of Jerusalem. Moreover, Ezekiel is instructed to cook them in a ceremonially unclean way, symbolizing the defiled food that the Israelites will eat in exile (Ezek. 4:13). By this means, the twofold message of

judgment is proclaimed on all Israel, both those who remain in Jerusalem and those who are in exile. Yet another aspect emerges, however, as the prophet protests the divine decree in verse 14. Ezekiel asserts that he has never consumed anything defiled, and the decree is promptly emended by the Lord to allow the prophet to maintain his ceremonial purity. Ezekiel thus stands as a picture of a righteous remnant: Though he is in exile, living among the nations just as the people of Israel will do, he nonetheless has managed to maintain his purity. Though the majority of the people may eat defiled food, through the grace of God and their commitment to him others will not.

Bridging Contexts

SIGN-ACTS OF the prophets. One of the great difficulties for the contemporary reader of Ezekiel is the outlandish nature of his behavior. We are uncomfortable with extreme commitments to religious beliefs, identifying those as typical of the "cults." If one of our relatives were to behave similarly to Ezekiel under the influence of his or her religious beliefs, we would probably seek some means of "deprogramming" that person. The recent mass suicide of about thirty members of the "Heaven's Gate" cult, who believed that there was an alien space ship concealed behind the Hale-Bopp comet waiting to take them up to "the next level," illustrates the presence of such cults within our society. But the problem with the Heaven's Gate cult was not, as many seem to suppose, the irrationality of their belief that there is something more to existence than this life. Rather, the problem was that what they believed was not true.

Of course, we should not make the mistake of thinking that Ezekiel's behavior was considered normal in his society either. By their standards too, his behavior was distinctly odd. But, unlike us, they would not have found it hard to believe that someone should be so taken up by the message he had received from God that it became the sole determining reality in his life. "Sign-acts" were a regular part of the way prophets went about their business.

Many of the prophets were instructed by God to perform dramatic actions to accompany their verbal messages. These ranged in content from simple sermon illustrations, such as when Jeremiah publicly smashed a clay jar to depict the coming destruction of Jerusalem (Jer. 19:1–13), to more complex acted-out parables, such as when the unnamed man of God pretended to be a soldier who had abused his trust by failing to guard a prisoner committed to his care (1 Kings 20:35–43).

It has been pointed out that there are basically two possible motivations for such actions: the belief that they have an influence on future events through the process of "sympathetic magic," and the desire to provide a dramatic visual aid to increase the impact of the message. These are, of course, not mutually exclusive motivations. However, since the words of the true prophet were nothing less than the word of the Lord and thus certain of coming true (Deut. 18:22), it is not clear how symbolic actions could have been perceived as having any greater power on events than the prophet's word.

Moreover, the essentially public nature of the symbolic acts of the prophets (whether that public was the general populace or a select group of disciples), along with the importance attached to an interpretation of the sign-act, suggest that the second motivation was more significant. "Sympathetic magic" would do its work *ex opere operato*, regardless of the presence or absence of an audience, but communication only takes place where an audience is present. Word and action support one another to create effective communication. As Leslie Allen comments: "If actions speak louder than words, here they were a megaphone for the prophetic words." 15

The language of "visual aid" is altogether too weak, however. Ezekiel's sign-acts are not diagrams on overhead projector slides with which he helps the slow-witted capture a difficult theological idea. They are "affective aids," aimed not at people's eyes but at their hearts and wills, the seat of their "affections." They are designed not merely to help people *see* the truth, but to *feel* the truth. In the same way as the sacraments are not merely visual aids to the gospel but are "signs and seals of the covenant of grace," so also the sign-acts are given not so much to clarify the message of the prophet as to drive it home to the people's hearts.

Ezekiel's communication style. Why, though, should the presence of sign-acts be "particularly characteristic of Ezekiel"? Why, out of all the prophets, should he have been required to act out his message so frequently? Perhaps it is due to the especially difficult communication task that faced this prophet. Up until the fall of Jerusalem, he had to preach a

message of that city's destruction to a people who believed it inviolable; after its fall, he had to communicate a vision of hope to a people tempted to despair. To a people well supplied with prophets telling them what they wanted to hear, Ezekiel had to say what God wanted them to hear, a task likened to being surrounded by briers and thorns and sitting on scorpions (Ezek. 2:6).

To get his message across, Ezekiel adopted some extreme measures at the Lord's command, including the performance of an unusually large number of sign-acts, which not only reinforced the content of his message but also underlined the extent of his self-commitment to the message.¹⁹ One might think of similarities to the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s in the United States. Speeches were all very well, but dramatic actions such as boycotting the buses or breaking the rules against eating at "all-white" lunch counters had more impact on the unconverted. They were much harder to ignore.

Ezekiel's communication style was as unique as his situation. He had swallowed the word of God, and now that message "took flesh" before the eyes of the exiles in the visible form of the acted-out scene of judgment on Jerusalem. No one could doubt his commitment to communicate that message, even though it would fall on deaf ears. The form of communication was ideal for a potentially hostile audience: a graphic, "inyour-face" message that would not easily be forgotten.

Contemporary Significance

VISUAL AIDS FOR the contemporary church. How do we communicate the message of God's wrath to a lost and dying world, a message that sinners would much rather suppress than hear? How, in our day and age, do we "make the invisible aggressor visible," as Ezekiel was called to do? In the past, people used vivid word pictures. Older preachers worked to portray in technicolor vocabulary and dramatic word pictures the pains of hell and the horror of sinners swept away unheedingly into the awful void. Thus, George Whitefield once depicted the sinner as being like an aged and blind beggar. This old man was being led by a little dog on a leash and was feeling his way along by tapping the ground in front of him with a cane. Gradually and unwittingly, he approached a yawning chasm; as he got nearer it, he first lost the dog's leash, then dropped his cane, and as he

stepped forward to retrieve it his foot found only empty air. At that point in the depiction, we are told that Lord Chesterfield leapt to his feet shouting out, "He's gone! He's gone!" In this case, the message had been effectively communicated.

But word pictures have their limitations in an increasingly visual age. The impact of television and video technology has transformed our time from a "word-centered" to an "image-centered" society.²¹ In such a visual age, many churches are experimenting with the use of drama and other visual aids in their worship services in a desire to communicate to modern people. Frequently, the prophetic sign-acts are cited as biblical justification for this approach. Is this a justified comparison?

Certainly, there are points of contact. Well-executed drama has an affective function, touching emotions not easily reached by words while stimulating and holding interest.²² It communicates to an indifferent audience more powerfully than words alone, which is why drama is particularly valued by "seeker-sensitive churches." Yet we should not fail to see the differences between the prophetic sign-acts and contemporary dramas. The prophetic sign-acts were more than mere visual aids or attention-getting devices. They were delivered with divine authority and thus functioned as the divine word made visible and sure. In Ezekiel's case, the message took over the messenger in a life-dominating way.

The ultimate sign-act. The real significance of the prophetic sign-acts emerges when we ask the question, "How did *God* communicate his wrath and his love to a lost and dying world?" He did so through the ultimate prophetic sign-act of the Incarnation, whereby the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, not to act out a ten-minute dramatic sketch but to live in our midst for thirty-three years. God did not merely put on human costume, he became a human being. The culmination of Jesus' earthly ministry was the profound sign-act of the cross, where God's wrath and mercy met. There that wrath was visibly depicted as the Sinless One was abandoned by God the Father. Just as Jerusalem was once abandoned by God because of her sins, so also Jesus was abandoned by God because of his people's sins. Jesus was not playacting when he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46).

Unlike Ezekiel, however, Jesus was genuinely doing away with the accumulated guilt of his people as their substitute, which meant enduring

the turning away of the Father's face. No wonder the sky grew dark and the earth shook! There on the cross was also depicted the love of God, whose passion for sinners was such that he would rather die than let them go. In the words we know so well that we frequently forget their awesome profundity, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16, KJV).

The cross is an "in-your-face" message of God's love and his wrath, his justice and his grace. That is why the message of the crucified Christ is a stumbling block and foolishness to many (1 Cor. 1:23). It refuses to trivialize sin, insisting that only the death of the Son of God was sufficient to atone for it. It refuses to compromise with our cozy delusions of adequacy, whereby we fondly imagine that our best efforts will be enough to satisfy the demands of God's holy law. It refuses to flatter our religious pride that demands a complicated scheme of salvation that allows us to earn our way to heaven.

Moreover, in the sacraments we perform dramatic reenactments of God's once-and-for-all sign-act. We are baptized into his death, visibly passing through the waters—a sign that assures us that if by faith we are crucified with Christ and if his death was for our sin, then we will certainly also be raised with him. We receive the broken bread, just as his body was broken for us, and the poured out wine, just as his blood was poured out for us, which remind and assure us that the efficacious sacrifice was made for us personally.²³ In liturgical churches, this personal aspect of the Lord's Supper is underlined by the repetition of the sentence, "The body of Christ broken for you; the blood of Christ shed for you." These sacraments are given not simply to feed our senses, as if the preached word by itself were insufficient; rather, they are given to minister to our affections, to drive home to our hearts the reality of our salvation in Christ, the message that has been preached to us.

In but not of the world. But the cross is not simply something that has been borne for us, it is also something that we are called on to bear (Matt. 10:38). God's "wonderful plan for your life" may easily involve suffering or even martyrdom for the sake of Jesus. Like Ezekiel, we are to be totally taken up by the message with which we have been entrusted. Many people will find our behavior odd in consequence, as we seek to remain pure in a

world that is not our home. We are called to be "Puritans" in the best sense of the word, living in a compromised world as those whose lives are uncompromisingly committed to obedience to God's Word and "perfecting holiness out of reverence for God" (2 Cor. 7:1). Our very lives are letters to the world from Christ, inscribed by his Spirit (3:3).

At the same time as our lives may be too pure for the taste of those outside the kingdom, we are not to be so separate from sinners in our desire for holiness that we fail to share the gospel with them. In the New Testament, the apostle Peter had a similar vision to Ezekiel's, in which he too was commanded to eat unclean food (Acts 10:13). His response echoed that of Ezekiel: "Surely not, Lord! . . . I have never eaten anything impure or unclean" (10:14). But unlike Ezekiel, he is instructed not to call impure that which God has made clean (10:15). This vision, so important to the book of Acts that it is related three times,²⁴ forms the theological basis for the mission to the Gentiles. The old laws of cleanliness, with their emphasis on separation from that which was unclean, had now been transformed on the basis of the new revelation in Jesus. As a result, the doors of the kingdom are now thrown open to "unclean sinners" and Gentiles alike, through faith in Christ.

In obedience to this vision, we are not to build walls to keep the prostitute and the drug addict out of our churches, nor are we to treat those who come into the kingdom with a checkered sexual or marital history as second-class citizens. These too, if they have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb, are declared by God as clean (cf. 1 Cor. 6:11). Like Jesus and Ezekiel, we are called to lives of identified purity, living in the world but not of it, loving every one of our neighbors even while living radically different lives from them.

Ezekiel 5

Now, son of Man, take a sharp sword and use it as a barber's razor to shave your head and your beard. Then take a set of scales and divide up the hair. ²When the days of your siege come to an end, burn a third of the hair with fire inside the city. Take a third and strike it with the sword all around the city. And scatter a third to the wind. For I will pursue them with drawn sword. ³But take a few strands of hair and tuck them away in the folds of your garment. ⁴Again, take a few of these and throw them into the fire and burn them up. A fire will spread from there to the whole house of Israel.

5"This is what the Sovereign LORD says: This is Jerusalem, which I have set in the center of the nations, with countries all around her. ⁶Yet in her wickedness she has rebelled against my laws and decrees more than the nations and countries around her. She has rejected my laws and has not followed my decrees.

7"Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: You have been more unruly than the nations around you and have not followed my decrees or kept my laws. You have not even conformed to the standards of the nations around you.

8"Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself am against you, Jerusalem, and I will inflict punishment on you in the sight of the nations. Because of all your detestable idols, I will do to you what I have never done before and will never do again. Therefore in your midst fathers will eat their children, and children will eat their fathers. I will inflict punishment on you and will scatter all your survivors to the winds. Therefore as surely as

I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, because you have defiled my sanctuary with all your vile images and detestable practices, I myself will withdraw my favor; I will not look on you with pity or spare you. ¹²A third of your people will die of the plague or perish by famine inside you; a third will fall by the sword outside your walls; and a third I will scatter to the winds and pursue with drawn sword.

13"Then my anger will cease and my wrath against them will subside, and I will be avenged. And when I have spent my wrath upon them, they will know that I the LORD have spoken in my zeal.

14"I will make you a ruin and a reproach among the nations around you, in the sight of all who pass by. ¹⁵You will be a reproach and a taunt, a warning and an object of horror to the nations around you when I inflict punishment on you in anger and in wrath and with stinging rebuke. I the LORD have spoken. ¹⁶When I shoot at you with my deadly and destructive arrows of famine, I will shoot to destroy you. I will bring more and more famine upon you and cut off your supply of food. ¹⁷I will send famine and wild beasts against you, and they will leave you childless. Plague and bloodshed will sweep through you, and I will bring the sword against you. I the LORD have spoken."

Original Meaning

THE IMAGE OF RELENTLESS judgment that we saw in Ezekiel 4 reemerges at the beginning of chapter 5. Here Ezekiel is called upon to shave his head and his beard, a sign of humiliation (cf. 2 Sam. 10:4). The instrument of this humiliation is described as both a "sharp sword" and a "barber's razor" (ta'ar haggallābîm). The first term serves to link this image with what precedes and what follows, underlining the military nature of the coming disaster, while the latter term shows that what God calls Ezekiel to do is to

act out in concrete form the imagery of Isaiah 7:20. In that passage, the prophet spoke of the Lord hiring a razor (*ta'ar*) from beyond the river (i.e., from the region on the east of the Euphrates) to shave the head, beard, and feet of Israel. Here Ezekiel records the arrival of the razor to do its work on the prophet, representing the people.

The prophet's hair itself becomes the medium for the last sign-act of the prophet in this sequence. Using a set of scales, he is to divide it carefully into three parts, representing the different fates that will meet the inhabitants of Jerusalem (Ezek. 5:2–4). God's judgment is not delivered in a haphazard fashion but is meticulously measured. Some of the hair is to be burned with fire, symbolizing those who die in the city; some he is to strike with the sword all around the city, symbolizing those who die outside the city; the remainder he is to scatter to the winds, symbolizing those in exile. A few of this last group he is to gather up and store in the apparent safety of a fold of his garment, which acted like a pocket. But even there they are not free from danger, for he is to take some of those hairs from their refuge and throw them back into the fire.

The interpretation of these last two signs is given in Ezekiel 5:5–17. The thoroughness of the devastation needs little clarification; that much was clear from the original sign. However, the reason for the devastation becomes clearer: Israel has transgressed her covenant relationship with God. The language Ezekiel adopts in these verses is not his own creation but is largely borrowed from Leviticus 26, a chapter that lays out the blessings and curses attached to the covenant. There covenant obedience is defined in terms of submission to the Lord alone, specifically through the avoidance of idolatry and respect for the Lord's sanctuary (Lev. 26:1–2). This matches the nature of the charge made against Israel in Ezekiel 5: They have committed idolatry and thus defiled the sanctuary (Ezek. 5:9, 11). More generally, they have not followed the Lord's decrees or kept his laws (5:6; cf. Lev. 26:14–15).

As a result, the curses of Leviticus 26 will be operative in their midst. The Lord's face will be set against them (Lev. 26:17). The result will be plagues of wild animals (Lev. 26:22; Ezek. 5:17), the sword and pestilence (Lev. 26:25; Ezek. 5:17), famine through a cutting off of the food supply (Lev. 26:26; Ezek. 5:16), eating of one's own children (Lev. 26:29; Ezek. 5:10), being scattered among the nations, and being pursued by the sword

(Lev. 26:33; Ezek. 5:12). This threatened exile will be a consequence of the iniquities of that generation and their fathers (Lev. 26:39; cf. Ezek. 4:5).

Even the Jerusalem-centered focus of the judgment reflects on an aspect of Israel's covenant relationship with her Lord, this time related to the Lord's covenant with David. When the Lord established that covenant, Jerusalem became, in his eyes, "the center of the nations" (Ezek. 5:5). When he chose Mount Zion as the site for the temple, that city was designated the dwelling place for his name (Deut. 12:11). Thereby, the Lord staked his name particularly on the land of Canaan, on the people of Israel, whom he had established there, and on the Davidic house. But the Lord's immediate presence, the crowning blessing of the covenant relationship, is no blessing to a rebellious people but rather a curse. For the Lord who is there is no longer with them but against them.

This covenant context is important because it demonstrates that the judgment that will befall Jerusalem is neither arbitrary nor unfair. The judgments coming on that city are not random afflictions thought up on the spur of the moment, as if God has lost his temper; they are the execution of the curses on the covenant breakers. Indeed, Israel has not merely failed to live up to God's standards; they have not even lived up to the standards of the nations around them (Ezek. 5:7). Instead of being a light to the nations, they have led the nations further into the darkness. For this reason, God must act to judge. As in Deuteronomy 13:9, where Israelites were forbidden to show compassion toward even their nearest and dearest or to spare them if they were attempting to lead others into apostasy, so the Lord will not show pity or spare his beloved but rebellious people (Ezek. 5:11).

The focus of each of the sign-acts is on the gloom rather than the rainbow, the tunnel rather than the light. Yet each contains within it, hidden away yet nonetheless present, the possibility of hope. The final sign-act is no different, for recalling the covenant curses of Leviticus 26 should also lead to remembering the promise of 26:44–45:

Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or abhor them so as to destroy them completely, breaking my covenant with them. I am the LORD their God. But for their sake I will remember the covenant with their ancestors whom

I brought out of Egypt in the sight of the nations to be their God. I am the LORD.

Both Leviticus 26 and Ezekiel 5 hold out the hope that the Lord's anger will reach an end before Israel will. Yes, God's anger and wrath must be poured out on Israel so that they may know the Lord as a jealous God (Ezek. 5:13; cf. Ex. 20:5), a God who will not share the devotion of his people with another. For now, they will be a ruin and reproach in the sight of the nations (Ezek. 5:14). But God's anger will cease and his wrath will subside once it has been fully vented (5:13), for the Lord is merciful and gracious as well as jealous (Ex. 34:6, 14). To put it more precisely, God has covenanted himself to his people and has made a commitment he will not break, even though his people are unfaithful (Lev. 26:44). The purpose of this present chastisement, therefore, is not to destroy them utterly and forever but in order that the Lord may once again amaze the nations by accomplishing a new exodus of his people.

Bridging Contexts

THE SUZERAINTY TREATY. The idea of the relationship between God and his people as a covenant is central to the Old Testament, and it is a key idea underlying Ezekiel 5. As already indicated, the judgments coming on Jerusalem are not random afflictions but curses attached to the covenant between Israel and her God. In the ancient Near East there were different kinds of covenants, but one of the forms most commonly compared with biblical covenants is the suzerainty treaty, known from Hittite sources.⁷

This type of treaty was a kind of diplomatic surrender document, whereby a great king (the suzerain) agreed to enter into a relationship with a lesser king (the vassal). In return for the protection and benefits of a good relationship with the suzerain, the vassal king agreed to submit to the suzerain, to serve him alone, and to pay tribute to him. A vassal could only have one suzerain, though a suzerain might have many vassals, who would have obligations to respect the rights of the other vassals as well as the suzerain. At the end of these treaty documents, there were attached blessings and curses, which invoked the power of the only higher authority in international politics, the gods. In the absence of any appeal to a United

Nations, the gods formed the ultimate sanction and were called upon to deliver blessings if the vassal king was faithful and curses if he broke the terms of the covenant.

Like these Hittite treaty documents, the Lord's covenant established with Israel on Mount Sinai concluded with blessings and curses (Lev. 26). If the people were faithful in obeying the stipulations of the covenant, they would experience material blessings in their land of peace and prosperity, culminating in the crowning blessing of the Lord's dwelling in their midst (26:11). But if they were disobedient to the terms and conditions of the covenant, serving other gods and rejecting their true suzerain, then they and their land would experience curses, culminating in the crowning curse of exile from God's land (26:33–39).

Ezekiel's point in picking up the language of Leviticus 26 is that because of Israel's unfaithfulness in her relationship to the Lord, pursuing other gods and serving them instead of the true God, all of the curses of the covenant are now falling on her. God's jealousy, power, and faithfulness to his Word are good news as long as Israel is faithful to him; but when she turns away, she cannot expect him not to act. Sure, certain, devastating judgment will fall on the unfaithful city and people.

Christ and the covenant(s). In the New Testament period, the covenant relationship made with Israel on Mount Sinai, as well as the earlier covenants made with Adam, Noah, and Abraham, find their consummation in Christ.⁸ He is the One who fulfills the conditions of the covenant for us, enabling us as his people to experience every blessing in him (Eph. 1:3). He is the One who took upon himself the curse that we deserved as covenant breakers, so that we might be redeemed by his blood (1:7). He is the One in whom the nations can find their inclusion into the one new people of God, the new Israel, the new temple in which God dwells by his Spirit (2:19–22).

For this reason, blessing and curse in the New Testament take on a different complexion from the Old Testament. The blessing we pronounce on God's people is that they may experience God's grace and favor in Jesus Christ through the ministry of the Holy Spirit: "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor. 13:14). This blessing of life in God's presence is for all who keep the words given in God's book (Rev. 22:7). However, there still remains a place for curse in the New Testament, specifically on those

who attempt to pervert the gospel, either by proclaiming a different gospel (Gal. 1:8–9) or by tampering with the true gospel (Rev. 22:19).

If that is true, what then is our relationship, as New Testament believers, to the concepts of blessing and curse? We should note that the New Testament blessings and curses are spiritual, pertaining to life in God's presence or death separated from God. The Old Testament shadows, whereby the blessings and curses were associated with material prosperity or disadvantage in the land of promise, have passed away; the reality is found in Christ. For us, then, blessing is not a new Cadillac and a house on the golf course, but to be united with Christ in his death and resurrection. The curse that we have avoided is not poverty and a dull life but eternal separation from the One who makes life worth living. Praise God, then, from whom all spiritual blessings flow!

Contemporary Significance

GOD, SIN, AND JUSTICE. If you have ever talked to people about God and the world, then I am sure that someone somewhere will have brought this up to you as an objection: "Where is this good God you talk about in a world gone mad? If he were really half as good as you say and half as powerful as you say, then evil would be instantly eliminated. Where is this God of justice? Why are there so many pointless wars and so much suffering in this world? Why doesn't God step in and do something?"

Ezekiel's message to the Israelites is that God is about to step in and do something. He is about to act against unrighteousness and injustice. But that is not good news for Ezekiel's contemporaries, because he is coming as their judge. It is as if in an old Western movie the beleaguered cowboys hear the bugle call that sounds to announce the arrival of the Seventh Cavalry—only to find that this time the cavalry are fighting on the side of the dispossessed Indians. Our basic problem in longing for justice is that we ourselves are sinners. For such as ourselves, the coming of the judge brings with it a problem: "Who can endure the day of his coming?" (Mal. 3:2).

Is there then no hope? Are we all doomed? The early chapters of Ezekiel certainly give a more negative outlook than we are accustomed to. We must not undercut the prophet's message by focusing exclusively on the glimmers of light and ignoring the tunnel. The prophet would have people

understand the depth of their sin—greater transgression than that of the nations around them, who did not know God (Ezek. 5:7)—and the extent of the wrath of God against sin, especially the sin of idolatry. When the Bible says that God is of purer eyes than to look upon evil (Hab. 1:13), what that means is that his face is set against sinful men and women. In other words, we all are under his judgment—or, to use Pauline language, we are all "by nature objects of wrath" (Eph. 2:3). Thus, left to ourselves, we have nothing to hope for on the last day except judgment and eternal separation from God. Because of our sin, we all sit on death row.

This fact is true not merely because of our own sin, which is bad enough, but also because of our history of sin. Indeed, humankind has a history of sin that stretches back not merely 390 years, as symbolized in Ezekiel 4, but back to the beginning of time and the sin of the first couple in the garden. Our problem is not simply that we have broken the covenant made at Mount Sinai and defiled the temple, making the place where God has chosen to dwell with his people unfit for divine habitation. Rather, in Adam we have all broken the original covenant relationship between God and humanity and made the world unfit for divine habitation. We were intended to be vassal rulers under God, ordering the world in submission to the Great King, serving him and him alone. In Instead, we rebelled against him, pursuing the idolatries of our hearts and bringing down on ourselves the sentence of death. Thus, for us as sinners, encounter with the living God can never be "a delightful and thought-provoking hour," but rather an awesome and terrifying encounter (cf. Heb. 12:21).

The flicker of hope and its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Yet if we must not overplay the flickering candle of hope in Ezekiel 4–5, we must also not ignore it altogether. Even on death row, God has his people. If Ezekiel himself is a model of the righteous remnant, undefiled in the land of exile, if there may be some preserved through the judgment, even if only a small fraction, if there is the possibility of a renewed exodus on the other side of the renewed Egyptian bondage, then there is hope. But how can that be? Justice must be done and the covenant curses must fall. If the wages of sin are indeed death, how can we survive payday?

Ezekiel does not yet begin to answer the question how. But by pointing his listeners back to Leviticus 26 and the covenant nature of the forthcoming destruction, he is already inviting them to consider the grounds

of hope implicit within the covenant itself, the faithfulness of the One who established the covenant, God himself. God has purposed in establishing the covenant in the first place to win for himself a people, and he will not allow that purpose to be thwarted, not even by the sins of those whom he has chosen. As Malachi 3:6 puts the equation: "I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed."

But still how can this be? Even though God is faithful and loving, he is also just. He is a holy God, of purer eyes than to look upon evil. So how can he forgive the guilty and still be just? Ezekiel does not give us a very clear answer to that question. He leaves it open. He knows that it is true, for God has revealed it to him, but he doesn't know how it can be true. But we who live this side of Christmas have a much clearer understanding. How can God be just and still forgive the guilty? How can the fire pass over us and not completely burn us alive? It is only because it has already passed over Jesus and poured its heat out on him.

The judgment that was to fall on Jerusalem for her sins was truly horrendous, so awful that few, a bare remnant of a remnant, would live to tell the tale. Yet it was nothing compared to the wrath of God that was poured out on his beloved Son on the cross for the sins of his people. The sword of God's wrath descended on Jesus; the fire of God's wrath burned him. He became an object of reproach to those passing by, who taunted him, "Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God" (Matt. 27:39–40). But the result was that the wrath of God was exhausted on him; he has been avenged on sin, his wrath is spent (Ezek. 5:13).

As a consequence, there is now no condemnation for us who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1). As Paul puts it in 1 Thessalonians 5:9–10: "For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him." The wrath of God came on him once and for all, so that it might not now or in the future have to fall on us, his people.

Ezekiel 6

THE WORD OF THE LORD came to me: 2"Son of man. set your face against the mountains of Israel; prophesy against them ³ and say: 'O mountains of Israel, hear the word of the Sovereign LORD. This is what the Sovereign LORD says to the mountains and hills, to the ravines and valleys: I am about to bring a sword against you, and I will destroy your high places. ⁴Your altars will be demolished and your incense altars will be smashed; and I will slav your people in front of your idols. ⁵I will lay the dead bodies of the Israelites in front of their idols, and I will scatter your bones around your altars. ⁶Wherever you live, the towns will be laid waste and the high places demolished, so that your altars will be laid waste and devastated, your idols smashed and ruined, your incense altars broken down, and what you have made wiped out. ⁷Your people will fall slain among you, and you will know that I am the LORD.

8" 'But I will spare some, for some of you will escape the sword when you are scattered among the lands and nations. 9Then in the nations where they have been carried captive, those who escape will remember me—how I have been grieved by their adulterous hearts, which have turned away from me, and by their eyes, which have lusted after their idols. They will loathe themselves for the evil they have done and for all their detestable practices. 10And they will know that I am the LORD; I did not threaten in vain to bring this calamity on them.

11" 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Strike your hands together and stamp your feet and cry out "Alas!" because of all the wicked and detestable

practices of the house of Israel, for they will fall by the sword, famine and plague. ¹²He that is far away will die of the plague, and he that is near will fall by the sword, and he that survives and is spared will die of famine. So will I spend my wrath upon them. ¹³And they will know that I am the LORD, when their people lie slain among their idols around their altars, on every high hill and on all the mountaintops, under every spreading tree and every leafy oak—places where they offered fragrant incense to all their idols. ¹⁴And I will stretch out my hand against them and make the land a desolate waste from the desert to Diblah—wherever they live. Then they will know that I am the LORD.'"

Original Meaning

LIKE THE EVER-WIDENING circle of ripples that come from dropping a stone into still water, Ezekiel 6 builds on the previous judgment oracle and expands it. Whereas before the prophet addressed the city of Jerusalem, the political and religious center of the land, now he is told to set his face against the mountains of all Israel. The geographical boundaries of judgment have been widened. The focus on judgment is clear from the structure as well as the content. The chapter divides into two parts, verses 2–10 and 11–14, each of which begins with a hostile gesture on the part of the prophet ("set your face," v. 2; "strike your hands together and stamp your feet," v. 11) and concludes with the recognition formula ("they will know that I am the LORD"). The Lord's wrath has been aroused and he will not be ignored.

There is more at stake in Ezekiel's choice of the expression "the mountains of Israel" for the central region of Israel than a mere nostalgia for the lost mountain grandeur of their homeland among the exiles living in the flat terrain of Babylon.³ While the borders of Israel expanded and contracted at different times in Israel's history, the hill country was always Israel par excellence. It was the Lord's "home turf," as the Arameans recognized (1 Kings 20:28), though they were also to discover that he could

win fixtures "on the road" just as easily! Moreover, Ezekiel's preference for phrases combined with the patronym "Israel" ("mountains of Israel" [hārê yis rā'ēl], "land of Israel" ['admat yis rā'ēl]) emphasizes the fact that this land will always be Israel. Even though the people may be in exile and another nation rule the territory, they can never own it, for these are in a special way "my [the LORD's] mountains" (Isa. 14:25; 65:9; Ezek. 38:21), which he has irrevocably given to his people Israel.

Yet it is precisely into that home turf that idolatry has penetrated. Ezekiel 6 expands the accusation of the previous chapter with clearer accusations of the nature of Israel's offenses. For the hill country is also the location of "high places" ($b\bar{a}m\hat{o}t$, 6:3). These are "high places" not necessarily in the sense of geographical elevation, for they can be located in a valley as easily as on a hilltop (Jer. 7:31; 32:35), but in the sense of a raised stone platform on which an altar and other cultic objects are constructed. Alongside the altars for animal sacrifice are frequently buildings for the associated festivities (hammanîm), which may also have housed idols (gillûlîm).

Prior to the building of the Jerusalem temple, the people were permitted to use the high places as locations for offering sacrifices to the Lord (1 Kings 3:2). Once that structure was completed, however, the worship of Israel was to be centralized in Jerusalem (Deut. 12). But in practice old habits died hard, especially when the old ways offered more convenient locations and more flexible rules. These local high places became the entry points for Canaanite religious ideas and images, whether the figures of Baal and Asherah or the practices that went along with Canaanite fertility religions. For that reason, the repeated failure of the reigning monarch to suppress the high places in both the northern and southern kingdoms is a major concern in the book of Kings; only Hezekiah and Josiah attempted to destroy them. Syncretism was at some times actually officially encouraged, while at other times the authorities simply turned a blind eye to it.

But Israel's rulers were not free agents in their choice of worship location; they were vassal kings under the rule of God. Though the vassal kings might ignore the breach of covenant that this false worship involved, with the people serving other gods instead of the one true God, the Great King would no longer tolerate it. Once more, as in Ezekiel 5, an echo of Leviticus 26 is unmistakable, as the covenant curses fall on the rebellious people. Leviticus 26:30 threatens: "I will destroy your high places

[bāmōtêkem], cut down your incense altars [ḥammānêkem] and pile your dead bodies [pigrêkem] on the lifeless forms of your idols [gillûlêkem]." Similarly in Ezekiel 6:3–5 the Lord says: "I will destroy your high places [bāmōtêkem]... and your incense altars [ḥammānêkem]... I will lay the dead bodies of the Israelites [pigrê benê yis rā'ēl] in front of their idols [gillûlêhem]."

It was not uncommon in the ancient world to defile altars by burning corpses on them, putting the profane in the place of the holy (1 Kings 13:2; 2 Kings 23:16). Here, however, the corpses are not burned on the altar but scattered around the altar so that they surround ($s\bar{a}bab$) it. This acts as a macabre parody of the ritual dances around ($s\bar{a}bab$) the altar, which served to sanctify it as a sacred place (Ps. 26:6; 118:27). The effect is nonetheless the same: The places of idolatry will be rendered unfit, and the idolaters themselves will be put to death (cf. Deut. 13:9). God will do what successive generations of kings failed to do and put an end to this abomination.

When God acts decisively in this way, the result will be that Israel "will know that I am the LORD" (Ezek. 6:7). This so-called "recognition formula" is characteristic of Ezekiel and occurs no fewer than four times in this chapter (6:7, 10, 13, 14). It stresses the fact that the knowledge of the Lord comes about not through self-examination and navel-gazing but rather as a direct result of God's actions in history. A remnant will survive the coming judgment, who will look back from exile and recognize that the Lord is the God who acts in history and that the fate suffered by his people is no more than just. There in exile they will become aware of their sinful state and God's righteous judgment. His words, whether those brought by Ezekiel or the covenant curses of Leviticus 26 or both, are not empty threats (Ezek. 6:10). They will know that the Lord is there and is not silent, to quote Francis Schaeffer's memorable phrase. In the control of the covenant curses of Leviticus 26 or both, are not empty threats (Ezek. 6:10). They will know that the Lord is there and is not silent, to quote Francis Schaeffer's memorable phrase. In the covenant curses of Leviticus 26 or both, are not empty threats (Ezek. 6:10).

This raises the question, however, as to what kind of knowledge of God they will attain in exile. Is it the forced knowledge of the rule of God in the world such as the Egyptians received, when after plague upon plague, they saw their horses and chariots drowned in the Sea of Reeds? The purpose of that power encounter was so that "the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD" (Ex. 14:4, 18), yet the knowledge they received is the knowledge of

despair, not hope. Or is it the knowledge of God that comes to the repentant, whose attachment to sin is broken through discipline?

Both possibilities seem present in this passage. "To remember" in the Old Testament is never simply the recalling to mind of the past, but includes the idea of a present action that flows from that recollection. Remembering the Lord seems to be universally positive in the Old Testament and elsewhere can clearly be used to describe repentance (e.g., Jonah 2:7). The content of what the people will remember about the Lord is his grief at their adulterous actions, and the result flowing from that remembrance will be self-loathing at their evil ways (Ezek. 6:9). This seems to imply the possibility on the part of at least some of the exiles of a repentant return to the Lord. This provides a model to Ezekiel's exilic audience, "overhearing" his words directed to the distant mountains: Even now they can act the part of the righteous remnant by remembering the God who acts and repenting of their sin and the sins of their fellow countrymen in going after dead idols who cannot save (Isa. 44:6–20). As much as their sin of idolatry delighted them in the past, now it will become an object of horror in their eyes.

However, in keeping with the focus on the dark side in these chapters, Ezekiel does not end his oracle on this happy thought. Instead, he returns to the theme of judgment on the house of Israel because of their abominations (Ezek. 6:11–14). The threefold judgment of sword, famine, and plague is once again unleashed on the land (v. 11). This fearsome trio is familiar from Leviticus 26 and Ezekiel 5, and they are three of the four "horsemen of the Apocalypse" in Revelation 6. The comprehensiveness of their activity is underlined in Ezekiel 6:12: Normally the two categories of "he that is far away" and "he that is near" comprehensively include everyone (e.g., Isa. 57:19), but here a third category is added: "he that survives and is spared." Even those seemingly fortunate ones who fall into this last category and escape immediate destruction will be subject to death, just as some of the hairs that Ezekiel preserved in Ezekiel 5:3 were later taken out again and thrown into the fire. Then, when the people are slain around their idolatrous altars and the entire land from south to north¹⁵ is turned into a desolate waste, the knowledge of the Lord will be established.

This twofold ending to the two oracles seems to envisage two opposite possibilities: repentance and return to the Lord (Ezek. 6:8–10), or the total devastation of the land and the wiping out of the entire people (6:11–14).

Both are indeed possible endings to Israel's story; in either event, the Lord's justice will be seen and known. Both are likewise possible endings to the story for each individual in Ezekiel's audience: They can remember the Lord and find hope, or they can simply continue on their present course and be utterly destroyed. By including both endings, Ezekiel invites his hearers to ponder their own condition. By choosing to end with the picture of total destruction, however, he underlines the dark future for the land of Israel: total desolation from one end to the other.

Bridging Contexts

ATTITUDE TOWARD OTHER religions. To a contemporary pluralistic society, Ezekiel's words of judgment seem unduly harsh. Indeed, even that statement may be too mild. For Ezekiel's favorite word for idols, *gillûlîm*, appears to be deliberately offensive, artificially formed out of the words for "to roll" (*gālal*) and "detestable objects" (*šiqqûṣîm*). This imagery of round, rolling objects that defile evokes the idea of excrement and amounts to calling the idols "sheep droppings," only in rather less polite terminology.

Such is not the typical language of interfaith dialog in our culture. We are used to seeing the practice of different religions and the operation of cults of one kind or another all around us, and are typically tolerant of their practices, provided they will be tolerant of ours. We do not normally expect judgment to fall on our nation as a result of the proliferation of differing religious viewpoints and practices. In the light of Ezekiel's words, is this a mistake? Ought we instead, as Christians, be working to ensure that the true worship of God alone is legally enforced in our land?

To do so would, I think, be to misunderstand the special position that Israel held as a nation in the Old Testament. She was uniquely God's chosen nation, called at Mount Sinai into a special covenant relationship with God. Part of that special relationship was a commitment on the part of Israel to be separate from the nations, belonging to the Lord alone. He would be their God and they would be his people, as the repeated covenant refrain goes. That special relationship was not in effect in the same way prior to Sinai, with the result that the patriarchs lived with a quite different attitude towards the religious beliefs of the surrounding nations. As Gordon Wenham characterizes it:

Though the patriarchs are faithful followers of their God, they generally enjoy good relations with men of other faiths. There is an air of ecumenical bonhomie about the patriarchal religion which contrasts with the sectarian exclusiveness of the Mosaic age and later prophetic demands.¹⁸

Nor does the relationship between God and his people carry over in the same way in the New Testament era of redemptive history. Thus, while Paul is distressed by the rampant idolatry of the Athenians (Acts 17:16), he addresses the assembled Areopagites in relatively complimentary terms, saying, "I see that in every way you are very religious" (17:22). He does not threaten the immediate judgment of God on their nation for their idolatry, though he urges them in no uncertain terms to abandon their futile idols and turn to the true and living God (17:30–31). The reason for Paul's different approach from Ezekiel is that Athens as a city-state was not in covenant with God and therefore not subject to the blessings and curses of the Sinai covenant.

Modern nation-states are likewise no longer in a covenant relationship with the Lord. Instead, it is the church that is the covenanted people of God. For this reason, Paul's harshest language is reserved for those who claim to be Christians but actually are preaching a false gospel. With such people there can be no polite dialog; for them, Paul is willing to envisage eternal condemnation (Gal. 1:8; cf. also the strong language of 5:12). They are no better than "dogs" (Phil. 3:2; Rev. 22:15), a term whose strong emotive content is not easily conveyed in our context. Jude is similarly scathing in his verbal assault on false teachers (Jude 8–16). Therefore, our application of this passage should be in terms of the faithfulness (or otherwise) of *the church* rather than the state. We should explore the dominant idolatries that readily invade the church and are advocated and encouraged by some within the church itself, and be ready to condemn them in the strongest possible terms.

Contemporary idolatry. What kind of idolatries is Ezekiel addressing, however, and how do they relate to the contemporary situation? The idolatries of the high places, with their representations of Baal and Asherah and altars for offering sacrifices, seem distant and foreign. Bowing down to

stone and wood seems a mark of ancient credulity to us. Yet if you analyze the appeal of Baal and Asherah, it is possible to see that their hold continues down to the present, even though their form has changed. Baal was the storm god, the chief god of the pantheon, the god of power and fertility, who if appeased could deliver victory in battle, and in peacetime the rain so vital to cultivation in Canaan. Asherah, his consort, was the goddess of fertility, perhaps better known to us in her Greek form as Aphrodite. By worshiping these gods, the Israelites sought to impose order on the chaos of the world around them and to invoke the aid of a higher power on their behalf. The idols promised power and security.

In addition, the sexual practices of ritual prostitution that were probably associated with the fertility cult needed little theological justification. To put it in the contemporary vernacular, Baal and Asherah were in effect the patron saints of sex and guns and rock 'n' roll, promising to deliver a potent mixture of satisfaction to the desires for power, success, and pleasure. This promise remains as attractive to people of the contemporary world as it was to those of ancient times, as any quick review of the recent offerings from Hollywood will demonstrate. However, the security and satisfaction that these sources offer is both illegitimate and ephemeral. God alone deserves the worship that these idols demand from us, and he alone is able to deliver the lasting satisfaction that we seek. Though our hearts restlessly wander from one idol to another, they will never find rest until they submit to the one true and living God.

But could Israel ultimately have been totally destroyed by God, no matter what their sin? God had set his name on her, allying his reputation intimately with her fate. This consideration had saved Israel before in the time of Moses when they worshiped the golden calf (Ex. 32:9–14). This remains a powerful and valid argument down into New Testament times, where Paul regards as unthinkable the possibility that God has rejected his own people (Rom. 11:1). But the ultimate certainty that God will be faithful to his covenant promises to redeem his people must never be transposed into a complacent attitude toward the threats he makes concerning those who break the covenant. Though God will preserve for himself a remnant for the sake of his name, yet he may equally definitively judge those who continue to rebel against him, be they Abraham's children or not, for our God combines in himself both kindness and severity (11:22).

Contemporary Significance

A MATTER OF life and death. How many times have you heard people say, "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere"? That is not an idea Ezekiel would have endorsed. According to him, judgment was coming on Israel, a judgment that was nothing less than the outpouring of God's wrath from heaven, which would level everything in its path. It was not coming because the Israelites had mistreated one another (although, as we will see, they had). Nor was judgment coming because they had taken advantage of the poor or been unfaithful to their wives, or even because they had robbed each other and filled the land with violence, but essentially because they held to a false religion. For them, what they believed would literally be a matter of life and death.

If what you believe is indeed a matter of life and death, then it is not nearly enough to be sincere. It is intensely important to be right. When you jump out of an airplane, you are not content merely to believe sincerely that your parachute is strapped on correctly. Rather, you will check and double-check that it is really so, because you understand all too clearly the consequences of getting it wrong. Indeed, the lengths to which people go to check the correctness of their beliefs in a particular matter is an accurate marker of how important they believe the matter to be. The people who say, "It doesn't matter what you believe about God as long as you are sincere," are those to whom it doesn't matter what you believe about God. But if, in fact, there is a God who designed the whole cosmic and human story with a purpose, so that the chief end of humanity is indeed to glorify this God and enjoy him forever, then what you believe becomes a matter of supreme and decisive importance.²¹

It matters intensely to God what his people believe about him. He entered a covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, where he declared himself a passionate God, whose name is Jealous, who would not share his people's affections with another (Ex. 34:14). His faithfulness to his covenant commitment meant a curse descending inexorably on those who broke the covenant and went after other gods, just as surely as it would mean blessing for those who faithfully sought after him (Lev. 26). Ezekiel's warning is that the time is at hand for God's jealousy to overflow into action as he judges his rebellious people.

A renewed people. But that outpouring of God's wrath can never be the end of the story. Though God is faithful to his covenant commitment to bring judgment on the rebels, he is also faithful to his deeper purpose to establish a renewed people, a restored remnant. That is small comfort to the people of Judah, who live in the path of the oncoming storm. To them, the gestures of Ezekiel bespeak God's settled attitude: God is determinedly against them and will not relent. But to the exiles, who overhear the conversation, there is a ray of hope. They are already in the situation described in Ezek. 6:9 and can identify with the remnant by remembering their own sin and recognizing God's righteous judgment.

Today, we too live in a world full of idolatry. In our situation, the idols are not of wood and stone, but they are nonetheless real. Each of us has "personal centers," areas of our lives in which we seek to find our identity and significance. These centers come in a variety of shapes and forms, ranging from pleasure and work to spouse and family. Even church can function as an idol, the place from which we seek approval and affirmation.²² Our "high place" may be the office, where we sacrifice our relationships to win the blessing of the god "career." It may be the family room, where we consecrate our "prime time" to the god of entertainment, or the kitchen and laundry room, where we devote ourselves to ensuring that our children have all of their physical and material needs met perfectly.

We measure our value and success by the extent to which these gods smile on us and consider ourselves of little value when they frown. In that respect, nothing has changed between ancient Israel and us. Like the rich young ruler who came to Jesus and asked him, "What good thing must I do to get eternal life?" (Matt. 19:16), something other than God is driving our lives. How ashamed we will be to stand before the Maker of the universe and realize how much of our thinking has been controlled by and centered on things that are not gods, to which we attributed godlike significance! Of how many will it be revealed that they spent their lives mucking about in the sandpit of life, living for insipid pleasures and weak fancies instead of launching out in dependence on the only true God? Truly, we will all have much of which to be ashamed. As C. S. Lewis put it:

Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that the Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot understand what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.²³

Not all of us will face the kind of judgment Ezekiel prophesied over Israel during our lifetimes, however. Many, like the rich young ruler, appear to prosper in their idolatry. But those whose idols are blessing them, in whose lives there is apparently no difficulty and disappointment, are more to be pitied than to be envied, for the judgments of God often serve as a wake-up call to our deaf ears. As Calvin comments: "The scourges of God are more useful to us, because when God indulges us, we abuse his clemency and flatter ourselves and so grow hardened in sin."²⁴

Two possible outcomes. Yet the judgments of God in this life do not work automatically. Two outcomes are possible, just as they were for Ezekiel's hearers. We may be moved by the pain of the situation to remember God's grace, and therefore to be disgusted over our sin and turn from it. Our eyes may be opened from our self-deceptive stupor to see the hatefulness of what we have given ourselves over to, so that we thrust it away from us as eagerly as we would a poisonous spider or a scorpion. Or we may continue unmoved, perhaps even further hardened in our sin, inexorably hastening towards final destruction. It is a sobering fact that those who fail to listen to God speaking to them become increasingly unable to hear God speak to them. But in either event, whether in the final destruction of those who continue to be rebellious against him or in the final salvation of those whom he brings to himself, God's justice is vindicated.

Ezekiel 7

THE WORD OF THE LORD came to me: ²"Son of man, this is what the Sovereign LORD says to the land of Israel: The end! The end has come upon the four corners of the land. ³The end is now upon you and I will unleash my anger against you. I will judge you according to your conduct and repay you for all your detestable practices. ⁴I will not look on you with pity or spare you; I will surely repay you for your conduct and the detestable practices among you. Then you will know that I am the LORD.

Disaster! An unheard-of disaster is coming. ⁶The end has come! The end has come! It has roused itself against you. It has come! ⁷Doom has come upon you —you who dwell in the land. The time has come, the day is near; there is panic, not joy, upon the mountains. ⁸I am about to pour out my wrath on you and spend my anger against you; I will judge you according to your conduct and repay you for all your detestable practices. ⁹I will not look on you with pity or spare you; I will repay you in accordance with your conduct and the detestable practices among you. Then you will know that it is I the LORD who strikes the blow.

10"The day is here! It has come! Doom has burst forth, the rod has budded, arrogance has blossomed! 11 Violence has grown into a rod to punish wickedness; none of the people will be left, none of that crowd—no wealth, nothing of value. 12 The time has come, the day has arrived. Let not the buyer rejoice nor the seller grieve, for wrath is upon the whole crowd. 13 The seller will not recover the land he has sold as long as both of them live, for the

vision concerning the whole crowd will not be reversed. Because of their sins, not one of them will preserve his life. ¹⁴Though they blow the trumpet and get everything ready, no one will go into battle, for my wrath is upon the whole crowd.

15"Outside is the sword, inside are plague and famine; those in the country will die by the sword, and those in the city will be devoured by famine and plague. ¹⁶All who survive and escape will be in the mountains, moaning like doves of the valleys, each because of his sins. ¹⁷Every hand will go limp, and every knee will become as weak as water. ¹⁸They will put on sackcloth and be clothed with terror. Their faces will be covered with shame and their heads will be shaved. ¹⁹They will throw their silver into the streets, and their gold will be an unclean thing. Their silver and gold will not be able to save them in the day of the LORD's wrath. They will not satisfy their hunger or fill their stomachs with it, for it has made them stumble into sin. ²⁰They were proud of their beautiful jewelry and used it to make their detestable idols and vile images. Therefore I will turn these into an unclean thing for them. ²¹I will hand it all over as plunder to foreigners and as loot to the wicked of the earth, and they will defile it. ²²I will turn my face away from them, and they will desecrate my treasured place; robbers will enter it and desecrate it.

²³"Prepare chains, because the land is full of bloodshed and the city is full of violence. ²⁴I will bring the most wicked of the nations to take possession of their houses; I will put an end to the pride of the mighty, and their sanctuaries will be desecrated. ²⁵When terror comes, they will seek peace, but there will be none. ²⁶Calamity upon calamity will come, and rumor upon rumor. They

will try to get a vision from the prophet; the teaching of the law by the priest will be lost, as will the counsel of the elders. ²⁷The king will mourn, the prince will be clothed with despair, and the hands of the people of the land will tremble. I will deal with them according to their conduct, and by their own standards I will judge them. Then they will know that I am the LORD."

Original Meaning

MANY PEOPLE THINK of the message of the prophets as, "Repent, the end is near." Ezekiel's message in this chapter, however, is: "It's too late to repent; the end has come." Just as in the days of Noah's Flood (Gen. 6), the sins of the people have reached such a pitch that it is time to wipe the land clean of them.

There is a twofold expansion in Ezekiel 7 in the scope of the judgment from that described in his previous messages. (1) It is once more expanded geographically. Just as Ezekiel began with the city of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 5 and moved on to the heartland of Judah, the mountains of Israel, in Ezekiel 6, so now he widens his scope of attention to include judgment on the whole "land of Israel" (7:2). Indeed, judgment has come upon the "four corners of the land [world]." The global language may be applied to a judgment that affects "only" Judah since, as Greenberg puts it, "from the prophet's viewpoint, the doom of his people is tantamount to the end of the world."

The phrase "land of Israel" ('admat-yis'rā'ēl) is unique to Ezekiel. 'adāmâ ("land," "ground") has a substantial semantic overlap with 'ereṣ ("land," "earth"), and in some contexts the former term may be chosen simply to provide a contrast with the latter. Thus in 11:17 the "land of Israel" ('admat-yis'rā'ēl) contrasts with "the lands where you have been scattered." Yet the physical and agricultural overtones that 'adāmâ contains may still be present, especially on the lips of an exile, denoting the land of promise as a place intended for fruitfulness and blessing (see, e.g., its repeated use in the covenant blessings of Deut. 28). However, as Ezekiel 7 unfolds, it emerges

that what has been growing in this fertile soil has been something other than what God intended.

(2) Ezekiel insists repeatedly that doom is not merely imminent but has actually arrived. Whereas the previous oracle spoke of a certain judgment to come at an unspecified time in the future, here we see a certain judgment now present. Thus verses 3 and 8 in Hebrew both start with the word "now," while verse 7 announces (lit.): "The time has come, the day has arrived." Further, in this chapter for the first time there is not even a glimmer of the light at the end of the tunnel, no mention of a possible remnant. The focus is entirely on the darkness of the descending gloom that is now falling over the land.

The language that Ezekiel adopts is influenced heavily by the traditional language of the Day of the Lord. This "Day" was frequently longed for during times of difficulty as the day when the Lord would come to judge the nations; however, the prophets had pointed out that it was also the time when God would judge his own people Israel (cf. Amos 5:18–20). The outcome of that Day of Judgment was likely to be far from positive. Thus Amos was shown a vision of ripe summer fruit ($q\bar{a}yi\bar{s}$, Amos 8:1), a vision that leads into an oracle of Israel's end ($q\bar{e}\bar{s}$, 8:2). Likewise, in Genesis 6:13, God had told Noah that he was about to bring an end ($q\bar{e}\bar{s}$) to all people, and the result was the Flood. So here, when Ezekiel speaks repeatedly of the coming of an end ($q\bar{e}\bar{s}$) on the people, what Judah is being threatened with is nothing less than complete and immediate annihilation. What Amos had foreseen concerning the northern kingdom is now happening in parallel fashion to the southern kingdom.

Ezekiel 7 opens with a brief oracle that summarizes the themes of the chapter (vv. 1–4). The prophesied end is coming on the whole land of Israel (v. 2), and it is coming now (v. 3). That devastating event is nothing less than the personal "sending" (šālaḥ) of the Lord's anger against them, just as earlier he had threatened to "send" his arrows of famine against them (5:16). But the Lord's action in destroying them is neither arbitrary nor unfair; it is simply judging them according to their conduct and repaying them for all their detestable practices. Measure for measure, they will receive what they deserve for their abominations (7:3), without favoritism or pity, resulting in an understanding of the Lord's power and holiness.

The second oracle (7:5–9) picks up from the first oracle the theme of the personal nature of divine judgment on the people's sin. All of the first person verbs from the first oracle expressing the outpouring of the Lord's wrath recur, along with a significantly modified version of the recognition formula, "Then you will know that it is I the LORD who strikes the blow" (7:9). No longer does the Lord reveal himself to his people as "the LORD, who heals you," as he did during the wanderings in the desert (Ex. 15:26); rather, he has now become "the LORD who strikes."

The third oracle (Ezek. 7:10–27) unfolds the theme of the comprehensiveness of judgment from the first oracle. It begins with a brief introduction (vv. 10–11), which draws out the organic connection between Judah's sin and her punishment. This was already prepared for by the agricultural background of the language of the "end" ($q\bar{e}s$); the "end" is the time for harvesting ripe fruit. Now the sin of Judah has reached full ripeness and it is time for the harvest of God's judgment. According to verses 10–11, Israel's "doom[?]³ has burst forth, the rod has budded, arrogance has blossomed! Violence has grown into a rod to punish wickedness." Alongside Israel's blossoming pride and violence, however, the rod of God's judgment has been growing, namely, Babylon. It will mete out punishment corresponding to the crime until there is nothing left. The people who filled the city with violence (7:23) will themselves be attacked by violent men (7:22; NIV "robbers"); the wicked will be turned over to "the wicked of the earth" (7:21); the arrogant will be humbled (7:24).

Suitably to its theme of comprehensive judgment, the oracle is itself massive and wide-ranging, consisting of two parallel cycles of judgment scenes that move from the general to the particular.⁴ These may be broken down as follows:

A: the futility of commercial transactions (vv. 12–13)

B: the announcement and arrival of war and devastation (vv. 14–16)

C: universal ineffectiveness, terror, and mourning (vv. 17–18)

A': the futility of gold and silver (vv. 19–20)

B': dispossession, looting, and desecration (vv. 21–24)

C': ineffectiveness, terror, and mourning by all classes (vv. 25–27)

When the threatened judgment falls, commercial transactions will lose their meaning; there will be no such thing as a good deal or a bad deal, whether for the buyer or the seller (Ezek. 7:12). The use of the traditional pairings of opposites ("buyer/seller," "rejoice/grieve") underlines once more the comprehensiveness of the disaster, while the following verse underlines the lasting nature of the disaster: "The seller will not recover the land he has sold as long as both of them live" (7:13). Even gold and silver will be worthless, able neither to save their owners nor to satisfy them (7:19). Indeed, these precious metals will be worse than worthless; they will not simply be regarded as trash, to be carelessly disposed of, but as something ritually unclean, contaminated in itself and with the power to contaminate anyone whom it touches (7:19). The reason for that loathing is because gold and silver furnished the materials for the people's idolatry (7:20), "for it has made them stumble into sin" (v. 19); it was the iniquity that caused their downfall.⁵

The nature of the disaster is the focus of the next section in the cycle: Though preparations are made for war, no battle will be joined, for God's wrath is on all her masses ($h^a m \hat{o} n \bar{a} h$, Ezek. 7:14; NIV "crowd"). Judah will be given over into the hand of her enemies, and all her possessions will be handed over as plunder (7:22). This is a reversal of the normal themes of holy war, whereby no battle would be necessary for the Israelites because the Lord would fight on their behalf, giving their enemies into their hand as plunder (cf. 2 Chron. 20). Now, however, the Lord will turn away his face (Ezek. 7:22), allowing the wicked of the earth to pollute the land and even to desecrate "my treasured place" ($s^e p \hat{u} n \hat{r}$; v. 22).

That change of attitude toward Judah meant that even the temple, where David had earlier expressed confidence that God would hide him (sāpan; Ps. 27:5), is no longer a safe place. It would be defiled along with their other (pagan) sanctuaries (Ezek. 7:24). Since Israel failed to distinguish between true and false places of worship and did not destroy the high places, now God's judgment will be similarly nondiscriminatory, destroying not only the pagan sanctuaries but his own temple.

In the face of this disaster, no coherent policy will be formulated or implemented. All hands will hang passively by their sides. Paralyzing fear will result in loss of control of bodily functions (Ezek. 7:17). The people will put on a show of mourning by means of their clothes and their shaven heads (7:18), yet no mercy or forgiveness will be found there, as God already announced (7:4). The people will seek peace and not find it (7:25), whether they seek it through the channel of religious leadership or political leadership. There will be no effective guidance through the religious leadership, whether the prophet (from whom a vision might be sought), the priest (from whom Torah, or instruction from the priestly law, might be sought), or the elders (from whom wisdom and counsel might be expected). Nor will there be effective leadership in the political realm. Not a "king" or a "prince" or any of the "people of the land" will act decisively to save the day (7:27). Rather, they too will be judged "by their own standards."

Bridging Contexts

A DAY OF RECKONING. The immediacy and comprehensiveness of the judgment of which Ezekiel speaks may, at first sight, seem to distance his situation from ours. We live in a world where immediate, comprehensive justice is not poured out on nations that transgress God's laws. However, judgment delayed is not justice denied. The fact remains that there will be a day of reckoning for all sin and for all sinners, when comprehensive justice will be done. Thus the writer to the Hebrews tells us: "Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment" (Heb. 9:27), while Jude writes: "The Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly" (Jude 14–15). Though this judgment may not be immediate, it will surely be comprehensive and also entirely fair: The just desserts ("wages," in Paul's terminology) of a life of rebellion against God is eternal death, exclusion from the presence of the one who is himself Life (Rom. 6:23). Those wages will have to be collected, sooner or later.

Notwithstanding that final judgment, there are also situations here on earth where our sins catch up with us. In Romans 1, Paul speaks of sinners who have "received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion" (Rom. 1:27). Because the world is God's world, to sin is to act in violation of the basic structure of the universe and thus to call down on oneself the

consequences of one's action. Because of God's mercy and common grace, we do not immediately receive the full consequences of all of our actions; otherwise each of our lives would be short and pain-filled. Yet God's mercy is not to be presumed upon and his judgments are not to be ignored.

If we presume on God's mercy, we assume that "of course God will forgive me; it is his job." To the contrary, Ezekiel asserts that sometimes God reaches the point where he will not look on us with pity or spare us, but instead will repay us for our sins (Ezek. 7:4). Instead, the kindness of God is intended to bring us to repentance while there is yet time (Rom. 2:4). Nor are we to ignore his judgments on us, for they too can have the gracious effect of breaking our stubborn attachment to our sins. Yet to remain stubborn and unrepentant in the face of all of God's patience is nothing less than "storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed" (Rom. 2:5).

The agents of justice. It is not hard to envisage the perfect meting out of judgment on the last day by the Judge of all the earth, the One "to whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid." The agents of God's justice here on earth, however, are often less than just themselves. In fact, in Ezekiel's situation the agents of divine wrath are themselves termed "the wicked of the earth" (Ezek. 7:21). But how can justice be done by the wicked? And how can God use the wicked to achieve his purposes without becoming tainted by them? There is an element of mystery here, as Calvin freely admits: "God works through them in such a way that he nevertheless has nothing in common with them. They are borne along by a depraved disposition, but God has a wonderful plan, incomprehensible to us, according to which he impels the wicked here and there—without becoming involved in their guilt." 12

God is able to write straight with a crooked pencil and to achieve his perfect ends through the use of less than perfect instruments, without himself being tainted or hampered by their imperfection. Indeed, it must necessarily be so if God is to do anything through the agency of human beings in this world, since "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). The statement that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (8:28) applies just as much to the wicked persecutions of the Roman emperor Nero and the genocides of the contemporary world as it does to the "impersonal" forces of nature. That is

why it is not simply famine and danger that cannot separate us from the love of God but even persecution and the sword (8:35).

What is more, God's power is demonstrated not merely in restraining such outbreaks of wickedness, but even in harnessing them. Do we find that surprising? Perhaps the fact that we are astonished that God can achieve his purposes through someone like Nero or Hitler, while at the same time being unsurprised at God's achieving anything through us, shows how shallow an understanding we really have of the depths of our own sin and defilement. In truth, it is really no more of a miracle that God accomplishes his purposes through the sin-tainted acts of Pol Pot or Stalin than that he does so through your sin-tainted acts or mine.

Contemporary Significance

THE ISSUE OF BLAME. Passing the buck for sin is an intrinsic part of present-day human nature. As the contemporary saying goes, "It's not whether you win or lose, but how you place the blame." Whenever something goes wrong, we seek to find someone else who is responsible. When we sin, we seek to pass the buck for our sin by saying, "It wasn't my fault; it's just the way that I was made"; or, "It's my parent's fault, or my family's fault, or my environment's fault." Interestingly, animals never do this. My dog can, and frequently does, do wrong. When you find him with his head in the garbage (again!), he can look as guilty as can be. He knows that he should not do it. But he never points the paw at someone else and says, "It was all his fault. He made me do it." Only humans do that.

This is, of course, not merely a modern condition; it goes back all the way to the Fall. When God confronted the first man and woman with their sin, immediately the excuses began to flow (Gen. 3:12–13). The man said: "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it." In the Hebrew, the word order is revealing: Adam starts off blaming God ("The woman *you* gave to be with me"), then he moves on to the woman (the feminine pronoun is emphatic, "she gave it to me"); only with the last word of the sentence do we get to anything close to a confession ("and I ate," which is a single word in Hebrew).

Then God turns to the woman: "What is this you have done?" She, in turn, starts her list (lit., "The serpent, he deceived me"), and then with the

final word of the sentence the single word confession ("and I ate"). God's judgment, however, falls on them all—in spite of their excuses—for all have sinned. So it is with contemporary men and women. All of our excuses will not save us from the judgment to come because that judgment is truly comprehensive: *All* will stand before God to give an account of their lives.

Appearing before the judgment seat. The reality and certainty of the coming Day of Judgment is what exposes the futility of all the idolatries to which we give ourselves. Is your idol your career? Do you really expect your position in the company to impress anyone on that day? Is your idol your possessions? Your Cadillac and your mansion in Beverly Hills will not be with you on that day. Is your idol your children? Will they be able to gain you preferential treatment on that day? Is your idol your church? There will be no "fast track" for those who have belonged to the "correct" denomination on that day, or for those who have filled respected positions such as pastors, elders, and deacons. Gold and silver will be of no value either, nor will connections—all the things in which we have trusted will turn to dust. On that day, the separation between the sheep and the goats will simply be based on the presence or absence of a living relationship with the Living God, through Jesus Christ.

But if that is the end of all things, why do we live in the meantime as if the present reality is what is really important? Why do we strive so hard to accumulate possessions that will not last and to gain influence and power that will not ultimately benefit us? The reason is that we have given ourselves over to our various idolatries and have forgotten our inescapable accountability to the one true God. Even believers will have to give an account for their actions, as the apostle Paul reminds us: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10). We need to learn to see the end from the beginning, to envisage the future vividly here and now and to let that vision dominate our lives.

Living in the light of the future. Have you never wondered why the Bible gives us such vivid depictions of heaven and hell? Do you ever sit down and imagine yourself joining in the praise and worship with a full heart of thanksgiving for what Jesus Christ has done for you? Do you imagine yourself hearing the Lord saying to you, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:21)? Do you see yourself walking down the

streets of gold, meeting and sharing fellowship with loved ones who have gone before and with the great Christians of the past?

And do you also hold before your eyes the awesome reality of the eternal damnation of the lost? Part of our problem is that this world seems very real and solid, and the other world shady and unreal. Thus, we think to ourselves, "Yes, I would like the Lord to return . . . but not before I get married, or before I finish this project at work, or before I go on this trip." But of course, it is really the other way about. It is heaven that is real and solid and substantial, while this world is shadowy and unsubstantial.

In his book *The Great Divorce*,¹³ C. S. Lewis pictures a group from hell on a day trip to heaven. One of the things they find bothersome is that everything there is far more real than they are. Even the grass is more substantial than they are and so it does not bend under their weight, making it painful for them to walk. In just the same way, the things that are so real and substantial to us in this world are unreal and unsubstantial when compared to the world to come.

Have you ever had a powerful experience of God's presence and closeness, perhaps in prayer or in a worship service? That is nothing compared to the presence of God that we will experience in glory. Or have you experienced the frustration of a single night without sleep, even in a comfortable bed, or weeks and months of unrelenting pain? That is nothing when set beside the fearsome reality of eternal separation from God, eternal torment, and frustration. As you replay over and over in your mind the videotape of the scriptural presentation of eternity, it becomes more real and substantial in your thinking. For Christians, that should mean a growing longing for that day; for those that are not Christians, repeated exposure to the truth of eternity should mean a growing (and appropriate) fear of the prospect. For that reason, heaven and hell should feature prominently in the preaching of our churches.¹⁴

It is striking that those for whom the present world holds least attraction are most passionate in their desire for the new world. Those experiencing persecution for their faith die witnessing to their expectation of immediately being present with the Lord. Those whose bodies are worn out or broken down look with eagerness to being free of their shackles, even as they may fear the pain of the process or lament leaving the ones they love. I have preached on the Beatitudes several times in different churches but never

with such power as when I spoke to a congregation traumatized by the recent discovery of a recurrence of breast cancer in the wife of a beloved elder. In that pain, the proclamation of the reality and nearness of heaven became infinitely precious to those who were there.

Experiencing God's grace in the here and now. Some, however, will experience greater consequences here and now for their sin, just as the generation of Ezekiel's day found the ax of God's judgment descending on them. Pride, while it may precede a fall, is rarely fatal. Sexual immorality, on the other hand, may lead to contracting AIDS, with all of its deadly consequences. That does not mean that sexual immorality is a worse sin than pride, or that all those who have AIDS are under God's wrath. The present judgments of God (those times when we do receive in this life the consequences of our sin) and the present mercies of God (all those times when we do not receive the consequences of our sin) are both intended to lead us to repentance. If God were never gracious to us, we would have little reason to expect forgiveness from him; but if God never judged sin, we would be likely to consider it a matter of little importance to him. The balance in the world is intended to reinforce the biblical teaching that God is a God of holiness and mercy, of justice and grace.

What specifically do the present judgments of God achieve in our lives? In the first place, as mentioned above, they act as a demonstration of his justice and a restraining influence on the spread of sin. When someone abandons a spouse and children and runs off with someone else, and then lives to regret the pain he or she has caused to all concerned, that may deter others from committing the same sin. But in addition, when the judgment of God falls upon us in the present, it exposes the nature of all the false hiding places to which we run.

Judah was warned they would find no hiding place in their wealth, for the whole commercial endeavor would be undermined (Ezek. 7:12, 19). They had turned their wealth into idolatry—in their case literally, by constructing idols out of their silver and gold. But in the day of distress, it would be evident that their idols could do nothing for them. If God does not intervene, they may never discover how empty of lasting value their lives are. But if God causes them to lose the objects of their idolatry, it becomes clear that the blessings their idol offered were empty, unable to fill the yawning void in the soul. As a precursor of the final judgment, a present

judgment may become the means for turning a life around. The pain of the lives we have shattered, including our own, may cause us to be humbled and return to our heavenly Father.

Or it may not. There are plenty of people whose idol has been shattered by God's intervention, yet they have not turned to God. Their wealth may be gone, yet they cling to the hope that someday it will return. Their health may be broken, yet they may simply become embittered and despairing. Their long-term friendships may be destroyed, yet rather than listen to the appeals of those friends they turn in on themselves. There is nothing automatic about repentance. Only under the sovereign grace of God do his judgments produce the fruit of changed lives.

We must, therefore, take God's grace seriously while it is offered to us. It is possible for a society to reach a point of hardness where God removes his witnesses from it, leaving it to its fate. The countries of Asia Minor, where many of the first churches were established, have been in many cases virtually without a gospel witness for centuries. We cannot presume that our case as a nation will be different. Nor can we as individuals assume that the offer of the gospel will be forever open to us. Even if our lives are spared, yet it is possible to become hardened to the gospel to such a point that there is no return. We become so inured in our pride that we are deaf to the only good news that can save us. God's only word to us is then imminent and comprehensive doom.

Ezekiel 8–9

In the sixth year, in the sixth month on the fifth day, while I was sitting in my house and the elders of Judah were sitting before me, the hand of the Sovereign LORD came upon me there. ²I looked, and I saw a figure like that of a man. From what appeared to be his waist down he was like fire, and from there up his appearance was as bright as glowing metal. ³He stretched out what looked like a hand and took me by the hair of my head. The Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and in visions of God he took me to Jerusalem, to the entrance to the north gate of the inner court, where the idol that provokes to jealousy stood. ⁴And there before me was the glory of the God of Israel, as in the vision I had seen in the plain.

⁵Then he said to me, "Son of man, look toward the north." So I looked, and in the entrance north of the gate of the altar I saw this idol of jealousy.

⁶And he said to me, "Son of man, do you see what they are doing—the utterly detestable things the house of Israel is doing here, things that will drive me far from my sanctuary? But you will see things that are even more detestable."

⁷Then he brought me to the entrance to the court. I looked, and I saw a hole in the wall. ⁸He said to me, "Son of man, now dig into the wall." So I dug into the wall and saw a doorway there.

⁹And he said to me, "Go in and see the wicked and detestable things they are doing here." ¹⁰So I went in and looked, and I saw portrayed all over the walls all kinds of crawling things and detestable animals and all the idols of the house of Israel. ¹¹In front of them stood seventy elders of the house of Israel, and

Jaazaniah son of Shaphan was standing among them. Each had a censer in his hand, and a fragrant cloud of incense was rising.

¹²He said to me, "Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the darkness, each at the shrine of his own idol? They say, 'The LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land.' " ¹³Again, he said, "You will see them doing things that are even more detestable."

¹⁴Then he brought me to the entrance to the north gate of the house of the LORD, and I saw women sitting there, mourning for Tammuz. ¹⁵He said to me, "Do you see this, son of man? You will see things that are even more detestable than this."

¹⁶He then brought me into the inner court of the house of the LORD, and there at the entrance to the temple, between the portico and the altar, were about twenty-five men. With their backs toward the temple of the LORD and their faces toward the east, they were bowing down to the sun in the east.

¹⁷He said to me, "Have you seen this, son of man? Is it a trivial matter for the house of Judah to do the detestable things they are doing here? Must they also fill the land with violence and continually provoke me to anger? Look at them putting the branch to their nose! ¹⁸Therefore I will deal with them in anger; I will not look on them with pity or spare them. Although they shout in my ears, I will not listen to them."

9:1Then I heard him call out in a loud voice, "Bring the guards of the city here, each with a weapon in his hand." ²And I saw six men coming from the direction of the upper gate, which faces north, each with a deadly weapon in his hand. With them was a man clothed in linen who had a writing

kit at his side. They came in and stood beside the bronze altar.

³Now the glory of the God of Israel went up from above the cherubim, where it had been, and moved to the threshold of the temple. Then the LORD called to the man clothed in linen who had the writing kit at his side ⁴and said to him, "Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it."

⁵As I listened, he said to the others, "Follow him through the city and kill, without showing pity or compassion. ⁶Slaughter old men, young men and maidens, women and children, but do not touch anyone who has the mark. Begin at my sanctuary." So they began with the elders who were in front of the temple.

⁷Then he said to them, "Defile the temple and fill the courts with the slain. Go!" So they went out and began killing throughout the city. ⁸While they were killing and I was left alone, I fell facedown, crying out, "Ah, Sovereign LORD! Are you going to destroy the entire remnant of Israel in this outpouring of your wrath on Jerusalem?"

⁹He answered me, "The sin of the house of Israel and Judah is exceedingly great; the land is full of bloodshed and the city is full of injustice. They say, 'The LORD has forsaken the land; the LORD does not see.' ¹⁰So I will not look on them with pity or spare them, but I will bring down on their own heads what they have done."

¹¹Then the man in linen with the writing kit at his side brought back word, saying, "I have done as you commanded."

THE VISION OF Ezekiel 8–11 is a unified whole, as readily becomes apparent when 8:1–3 is compared with 11:24–25. Nevertheless, for the sake of simplicity, we will divide it up into two parts: chapters 8–9 and 10–11.

The vision opens with a date: the fifth day of the sixth month of the sixth year (of Jehoiachin's exile); in our reckoning, that would be September 18, 592 B.C. In other words, some fourteen months have passed since the opening vision of the book. The intervening time has been largely spent in performing the sign-acts of Ezekiel 4; depending on the interpretation of the 390 plus 40 days, Ezekiel has either just completed that period or is close to completion of that period.

However, although the date formula serves to mark chapters 8–11 off from what precedes, the close connection with chapter 7 is maintained. Ezekiel 8 unfolds and details the accusation of "detestable idols and vile images" made in 7:20, while the theme of "the land . . . full of bloodshed and the city . . . full of injustice" (9:9) echoes the charge of 7:23. The divine response to this state of affairs is: "I will not look on them with pity or spare them, but I will bring down on their own heads what they have done" (9:10; cf. 7:4). In the same way, the divine destruction of chapter 9 corresponds to that threatened in chapter 7. Thus, it would not be inappropriate to say that Ezekiel 8–9 depicts in visionary form what Ezekiel 7 stated in oracular style.

Nevertheless, there are also differences. The vision of Ezekiel 8–11 is intended for a specific audience, "the elders of Judah," who have gathered at Ezekiel's house. Though the purpose of their visit is not recorded, they were presumably seeking a favorable oracle, perhaps one proclaiming an early end to the Exile.² 2 Kings 6:32 describes the elders of Samaria sitting with Elisha and receiving an encouraging word from the Lord (see 7:1), while Ezekiel 14:1 and 20:1 record similar visits by the elders to Ezekiel.³ What the elders receive from the prophet is no word of comfort but rather a categorical denunciation of their sins and the sins of the community they represent. They are not simply the audience to whom the vision is related, but also one of the chief targets of the vision.⁴

As the vision opens, Ezekiel sees a glowing figure in human form, corresponding to what he had seen in 1:27. Once more he is transported by the agency of the Spirit and shown a vision of the glory of God (ch. 10); the context of the vision, however, is no longer the situation of the exiles but

the defiled city of Jerusalem. The prophet is shown four scenes of increasing abomination, with the offense to God being greater as the scenes in which they take place move nearer to the center of the temple.

- (1) His tour begins with a vision of an "idol of jealousy" at the north gate of the city (8:3–6). This seems to have been an idol in the shape of a human being, perhaps the Canaanite goddess Asherah, whose location at the outer north gate suggests that she was intended to guard the city from attack. As we saw in Ezekiel 1, the north was the traditional direction from which Jerusalem's enemies approached. If so, then the goddess is powerless to prevent the sack of the city by the Lord's appointed destroyers in Ezekiel 9. The focus of the attention here, however, is the effect that this image has on the Lord. It "provokes [him] to jealousy" (8:3; cf. Deut. 32:16); God will not share Israel's worship, which rightfully belongs to him, with other gods, and he has proof of her infidelity.
- (2) However, abominable though this idolatry is, worse is yet to come. Next, Ezekiel is shown seventy elders of the house of Israel, leaders among the lay community, offering incense to idols in a secret chamber (Ezek. 8:7–13). What was done in public at a distance from the temple is also being done in private at the entrance of the temple courtyard. The elders are portrayed as standing before a wall of carved animal figures, each offering clouds of incense from a burner (8:11).

In contrast to the Canaanite origin of the Asherah idol, the practice of offering incense to animal figures may well have an Egyptian provenance. The motivation was probably apotropaic, that is, to ward off dangers from demonic forces. Their actions provide a shocking contrast to the seventy "elders of Israel" in the Pentateuch, Israel's leaders in the desert period, who received the unique privilege of seeing God (Ex. 24:1–11) and were endowed with the same Spirit as Moses (Num. 11:16–30). Here these "non-Spirit-filled" elders find justification for their conduct in the belief that the Lord does *not* see (Ezek. 8:12). One of their number is named as Jaazaniah, who is designated the son of Shaphan—and thus equally shockingly associated with a family that was prominent in the reforms of Josiah's days (2 Kings 22:3–14).

The identity of these secret transgressors as "elders of the house of Israel" is repeated for emphasis in the next verse (Ezek. 8:12), along with their own self-justification for their idolatrous acts: "The LORD does not

see us; the LORD has forsaken the land." In the light of what they saw as God's abandonment of them, they felt justified in pursuing other deities who might help out. The Lord's response to this statement will emerge in 9:9; however, for the present it is sufficient to point to the vision itself as contradicting their belief. The Lord does indeed see, as the repeated refrain "Son of man, do you see . . . ?" underlines (8:6, 12, 15, 17). Far from the Lord's having abandoned the land, it is they who have driven the Lord away (8:6). Far from their incense-burning being an effective means of warding off dangers, it is one of the causes of God's impending judgment on them. Ironically, it is their vision that is clouded, not the Lord's.

- (3) Worse still is the sight of women weeping for Tammuz at the north gate of the temple itself (8:14–15). With each new scene we approach closer to the heart of Israel's worship. Weeping for Tammuz was a Babylonian ritual, marking the death and descent into the underworld of the god Dumuzi, whose mythological course of death and "resurrection" (or more accurately, "return") was thought to be parallel to the annual rhythm of nature. The cultic act of mourning was believed to counteract the loss of power of new life, thus hastening the return of fertility. Lamentation for the dead had been substituted for the worship of the living God. 12
- (4) The final and supreme act of idolatry takes place within the inner court of the temple itself, where Ezekiel sees twenty-five men turning their backs on the temple proper and prostrating themselves to the east, in worship of the sun (8:16).¹³ This is the ultimate abomination: Instead of bowing down to worship the Lord and seeking his face, they turn their backs on God and worship the created order.

In four brief scenes, then, Ezekiel has been shown the comprehensive nature of the sins of Jerusalem. Their sin extends from outside the city gate to the inner courtyard of the temple itself. It involves both men and women, even the seventy elders, symbolic of the leadership of the whole people. It includes idolatry imported from all sorts of surrounding nations (Canaan, Egypt, and Babylon) and involving all kinds of gods (male and female human figures, animal figures, and stellar bodies). This is a unified, universalized religion, the ultimate multifaith worship service. From the Lord's perspective, however, the picture is one of abomination piled on abomination.

The combination of such a mass of idolatry with their sins against humanity (summarized in 8:17 under the general title "violence") is an explosive mixture. They have continually provoked the Lord to anger and will now receive their just desserts. Even as the ax is poised to fall, their last gesture is one of defiant idolatry, "putting the branch to their nose" (8:17). They will receive what they deserve as the Lord deals with them in his wrath, neither pitying nor sparing. He will be deaf to their loudest cries for help.

What is more, the Lord will do some shouting of his own, and unlike their ineffectual cries, his voice will make things happen (Ezek. 9:1).¹⁵ He summons six "guards," each of whom appears armed with a club. These guards would normally have had the responsibility of standing at the gates, protecting the realm of the sacred from profane intrusion.¹⁶ Here they appear together with a priestly figure dressed in linen, armed only with a writing kit.

These figures are normally interpreted as angelic beings because of their superhuman role in the vision and the symbolic nature of their total number (seven). However, it is worth noting that if 9:1–2 existed as a fragment, without the surrounding context, we would naturally understand it as speaking of normal human figures obeying the summons of the king. This helps us to remember the dual nature of these figures. On the one hand, in the vision they are the angelic servants of the Most High, wreaking his judgments on the earth; on the other hand, those same judgments are carried out in history through human agency, so the six destroyers may equally aptly be seen to represent the Babylonian invaders. If this much is true, is it not also true that the seventh figure, the priestly writer, acts in some sense as Ezekiel's own *alter ego*? He obediently passes among the people prior to the judgment, distinguishing the righteous from the wicked, marking out those who sigh and cry¹⁷ over the detestable things done in Jerusalem (9:4).

Hard on his heels come the agents of destruction, who themselves take on the attitude of God toward the people (9:5): They are to strike (cf. 7:9) without pity or compassion (cf. 8:18). Their destructive work is a kind of reenactment of the first Passover, only with Judah instead of Egypt as the scene of the devastation. Just as the Lord passed through ('ābar, Ex. 12:23) Egypt, handing over those without a protective mark to the destroyer (mašhît, Ex. 12:23), so also the six are to "pass through" ('ābar) the city,

"slaughtering to destruction" (*tahargû l^emašḥît*) anyone who does not bear the mark. All those without the mark are to be slain—young and old, male and female (Ezek. 9:5–6).¹⁸ The categories listed demonstrate that even the defenseless, the frail, and the innocent are condemned to destruction.¹⁹

The slaughter is to begin at the temple with the chief idolaters: the twenty-five elders who were worshiping the sun (9:6; cf. 8:16). Unlike in the case of Queen Athaliah, who was dragged out of the temple complex before being executed so that it would not be defiled by her blood (2 Kings 11:15–16), now the killing takes place within the temple itself (Ezek. 9:7). It is already so contaminated by their idolatry that God himself has no compunction about defiling it further (9:7; cf. 7:22: "They will desecrate my treasured place").

In the midst of the carnage, Ezekiel is left alone (9:8) before the Lord. He begins to fear that he may really be all alone—a remnant of one—and he cries out "Ah, Sovereign LORD! Are you going to destroy the entire remnant of Israel in this outpouring of your wrath on Jerusalem?" The Lord's answer to the prophet's question appears to be yes. He points to the depth of the abominations and sin of the house of Israel and Judah. The land is full of bloodshed and the city full of injustice. The attitude of the elders is summed up in this phrase: "The LORD has forsaken the land; the LORD does not see" (9:9). Therefore, they can expect no pity or compassion, but just retribution for their actions, which is the final proof that he has indeed seen everything that has transpired.

Yet at this critical juncture, precisely when it appears that all hope is gone, suddenly the priestly figure with the writing kit reappears, saying, "I have done as you commanded" (9:11). His appearance also answers Ezekiel's question concerning the remnant, for he stands mute testimony to the Lord's purpose to save those who sigh and mourn over the abominations of Jerusalem. We are not told how many he has marked—indeed, we are not even told that he has marked any—yet his presence acts to mitigate slightly the awful severity of the judgment, just as the rainbow of 1:28 tempers slightly the coming windstorm of God's wrath. As at the time of the Exodus, there is shelter from God's destruction for those who are willing to take refuge in the appointed sign. But on this occasion, it seems that those being saved will indeed be few.

Bridging Contexts

ROTTEN TO THE CORE. When interpreting these chapters, it is essential to remember that what is recorded here is a vision. That does not mean that the events recounted here are *unrelated* to reality: For instance, the destruction of Jerusalem that Ezekiel witnessed was the foreshadowing of the very real destruction of that city by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. But it does mean that they are not *directly* related to historical events. The six armed guards represent the Babylonian forces,²⁰ but they are not the same as them. This distinction means that we should not assume that the view Ezekiel received of Jerusalem would have been that open to anyone touring the temple precincts in 592 B.C.; rather, it is a stylized representation of reality intended to make a particular point.²¹

That particular point is not hard to find: The core of Israel's being is rotten with idolatry. The people as a whole had abandoned the true God and instead gone after every possible alternative god. Even when the worship took place in the temple precincts (under the title of Yahwism?), the true God was not being worshiped. The incompatibility of the alien religions with the true religion is nowhere clearer than in the case of the twenty-five sun-worshipers, who turn their backs on the temple building proper (and thus on the Lord) to carry out their devotions (8:16). If the bastion of true religion has thus been infected, then there must be no true worship left anywhere in Israel.

Yet in the midst of this comprehensive catalog of idolatry, we should not miss the essentially lay and democratic nature of the cults described.²² There are no priestly or royal figures leading the worship; instead, the leading figures are repeatedly identified as "elders." It is thus the mass of the laity, represented by the elders, who are identified as primarily responsible for the idolatrous abominations that fill the land.²³ This observation, of course, grows in significance when it is remembered that Ezekiel's audience is composed of "the elders of Judah" (8:1). There is no one else on whom to lay the blame for Jerusalem's destruction.

The Lord as a God of judgment. The result of comprehensive idolatry is apparently comprehensive slaughter. The practice of holy war, whereby all the inhabitants of a town were to be slaughtered, was commanded by God when Israel occupied the Promised Land. On that occasion, Israel filled the place of the armed angelic beings, acting as agents of God's

righteous judgment. They functioned as the human equivalent of the burning sulfur from heaven that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah and all its residents, young and old. The Canaanites were not to be destroyed because they were in the way of progress, innocent bystanders mown down by the juggernaut of God's gentrification of their neighborhood. They were judged because their sin reached full measure, as Abraham had been informed (Gen. 15:16). Now, however, Israel has become exactly like the Canaanites they replaced; their sin has reached full measure, and God's judgment will descend likewise on them.

This is an aspect of God's character that we do not often think about. We like to think of God as "the LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin" (Ex. 34:6–7). Yet he goes on to reveal himself also as the One who "does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation." As one writer comments about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah: "The Lord waits long to be gracious, as if he knew not how to smite. He smites at last as if he knew not how to pity."²⁴ When judgment fell on Canaan, it was swift, inexorable, completely lacking in pity. Now the "new Canaanites," Israel will experience the same inexorable wrath of God.

Such a concept of judgment is not palatable to modern minds. But we may not realize that it was no more palatable to ancient "civilized" thought either. The ancient heretic Marcion drew a radical distinction between the wrath-filled God of the Old Testament and the purely loving God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, revealed in the New Testament. In response, Tertullian pointed out what an emasculated, inconsistent figure Marcion's god was. This supposed deity:

plainly judges evil by not willing it, and condemns it by prohibiting it; while on the other hand, he acquits it by not avenging it, and lets it go free by not punishing it. What a prevaricator of truth is such a god! What a dissembler to his own decision! Afraid to condemn what he really condemns, afraid to hate what he does not love, permitting that to be done which he does not

allow, choosing to indicate what he dislikes rather than deeply examine it!²⁵

Such an attitude of speaking forcefully against evil, while all the time being unwilling to act against it, is considered utterly reprehensible in world leaders. Yet Marcion's modern followers, who shy away from the idea of God's wrath against sin, have a picture of God that makes him appear not unlike Neville Chamberlain, returning from Munich waving a piece of paper proclaiming, "Peace in our time!" unwilling to confront the growing power of Hitler with actions. In Niebuhr's classic description of liberal theology, they picture "a God without wrath, who brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment, through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."²⁶

Holy war stands as the clearest possible declaration of God's commitment to the purity and holiness of his people, totally separate from possibly defiling influences. God's holiness remains implacably opposed to sin. In the present, we are therefore enrolled as his people in a no-holds-barred contest with the forces of the evil one (Eph. 6:10–18), while in the future there will yet come a day when God's wrath will be poured out comprehensively on the wicked (Rom. 2:5).

Vengeance belongs to the Lord. At the same time, there is a danger with being too comfortable proclaiming the wrath of God. In those periods of history where the church has been entirely comfortable with divine judgment, people have sometimes been quick to call it down on their opponents or set themselves up as the agents of divine vengeance. Jesus had to rebuke James and John for wishing to initiate eschatological vengeance (fire from heaven) on a village that would not receive Jesus (Luke 9:54). In our present situation in redemptive history, we are not to slaughter our enemies but to win them over with inexplicable deeds of tolerance and kindness (Matt. 5:39–42; Rom. 12:17–21). Now is the time for the preaching of the gospel to all nations, the bringing in of those who are outside into the covenant community.

What gives urgency to our task is the knowledge that there is a sure and certain Day of Judgment coming. Perhaps it may be a morning like this, when people are out taking their kids to school and doing the shopping. They may be planning weekend trips to Disneyland and the lake, looking

forward to weddings and family gatherings, busy with the chatter of what they did yesterday and what they plan to do tomorrow. On just such a day the heavenly shout will be heard, just as Ezekiel heard it in his vision, and the time of judgment will begin. Those spared in that judgment will be only those who, like Ezekiel's remnant, sigh and mourn over the abominations that surround them and whose foreheads have been marked out with the name of the Lamb and of his Father (Rev. 14:1). For the rest, there will be nothing to expect but eternal fire. The destruction of the idolaters of Jerusalem stands for us as an awful warning of God's wrath to come.

Contemporary Significance

CONTEMPORARY IDOLATRIES. In all good soap operas—and most bad ones as well—the plot revolves around the various idolatries of the characters. Now I have to confess at this point that I am not a regular watcher of soap operas, so I cannot really speak from first-hand experience. But while doing some academic research on the subject I came across this summary of the characters in *Melrose Place*:

Sydney has been a hooker, an exotic dancer, and a drug addict. Jo harpooned Reed, the father of her child, then Kimberly kidnapped the kid, forcing Jo to go to the authorities, who put the child up for adoption so that neither one would have it. Matt was framed for the murder of his lover; Jake pushed his half-brother off a building; Alison became an alcoholic; went into recovery, then fell off the wagon again, before temporarily going blind in the 1995 explosion (courtesy of Kimberly) that blew the apartment complex to bits.²⁷

Just an everyday tale of ordinary folk, isn't it? It tells the story of the usual selection of lust, love, murder, mayhem, and addictive behaviors. Well, perhaps it is not exactly everyday, but what makes these soap operas so fascinating to people is the fact that these characters have no restraints on the expression of their idolatries. Why do they fall into bed with one another so easily? It is because their feelings of lust have become an

idolatry, an idolatry that says that nothing in the world is of comparable significance to meeting the demands of these feelings right now. God's law, which forbids immorality and adultery, is considered by them a matter of relatively insignificant weight.

Why do they murder one another at the drop of a hat? It is because their feelings of jealousy and anger have become an idolatry that says, "Feed me or I will make your life miserable!" Why do they lie and cheat and steal? It is because their covetous hearts have fastened onto an idol that they must have, regardless of the consequences. These are idolaters who live out the full scope of their idolatries. Face it, without idolatry every soap opera would be reduced to the most basic, not to say boring, story lines.

In Ezekiel 8, the prophet depicted abominations of *Melrose Place* proportions. In this chapter, he sees four visions of idolatrous groups operating within the Jerusalem temple itself, turning it from the Lord's place into Marduk's Place . . . and Asherah's Place and the home of every idolatry under the sun. To those involved in these idolatrous practices, he gives the warning that the result of comprehensive idolatry will be comprehensive slaughter, which he describes in visionary form in Ezekiel 9.

The dangers of practical polytheism. We too face an abundance of idols all around us in our multicultural age. Frequently, people speak of ours as being an age of pluralism, as if that somehow makes our time distinct from the past. This is palpable nonsense, for at many times in the past, not least during the New Testament era and the time of the Exile, God's people have found themselves placed in a melting pot of world religions. The options available in the "marketplace of religions" have often been just as diverse in previous centuries as they are at present.

In the face of such diversity, several responses are possible. Some take a smorgasbord approach and "mix and match" elements from a variety of religions according to their own taste.²⁸ Such a "practical polytheism" may well be popular with the man or woman in the street, for it demands only what you wish to give and offers whatever you wish to ask. It makes no unwanted ethical demands, though it can take an ascetic form if that is your preference. The reward it offers can be an ethereal nirvana or materialistic success or a combination of both, depending on your taste.²⁹ In short, the hallmark of any pluralistic age is that idolatry comes in all shapes and sizes

and encourages us to attend regularly the church or religious institution of our choice.

In contrast, the Bible urges us that the "choice" facing us is not between equally valid methods of expressing our spirituality but between truth and falsehood, between worshiping the God who created us or bowing down to abominations that are not gods at all. The essence of idolatry is not so much denying the reality of God but the relevance of God. Thus the saying of the elders of the house of Israel was, "The LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land" (8:12). They did not deny the existence of God but simply asserted his irrelevance. This perhaps sheds some light on the repeated finding in the polls that an overwhelming proportion of Americans believe in God's existence and in the Bible as his Word, yet never go to church or read the Bible. They are practical polytheists, who have created a religion to fit their own preferences.

Sometimes such practical polytheism even invades the church. There are those who support the idea of "multifaith" services, on the grounds that we are really all worshiping the same God, only under different labels. Ezekiel's vision, on the other hand, would categorically condemn such an approach. All of the worship that he sees, no matter what its source or how exalted and noble its liturgy, is a matter of turning one's back on the Lord, of foul abominations for which the judgment of God is coming on his people.

Nor is that simply a matter of Old Testament narrow-mindedness on Ezekiel's part. The apostle Paul is equally insistent on the incompatibility of Christianity and other religions. He urges the Corinthian Christians to flee from idolatry (1 Cor. 10:14). They are not to participate in pagan sacrifices alongside their Christian profession, for as he says: "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?" (1 Cor. 10:21–22). For Paul, just as much as for Ezekiel, participation in idolatry will rouse the Lord's jealousy, a thing greatly to be feared.

Baptism as an identifying mark. This radical distinction between the community of God's people and the rest of the world is the reason why we are baptized. Baptism, similar to circumcision in the old covenant, functions as a mark placed on an individual, identifying him or her as belonging to

the covenant community.³⁰ It is a sign that they are under the authority of the covenant overlord, God himself. This aspect of baptism as marking one out from the world and under the authority of Christ is frequently not understood today. William Willimon tells of an experience he had after participating in a panel discussion on "Homosexuality and the Church." After the discussion, a young man came up to him saying that he was "a baptized Episcopalian" and "none of you have a right to tell me who I am. I define myself." Willimon's response to this person was to point out that if his first declaration were true ("I am a baptized Episcopalian"), his second declaration ("none of you have a right to tell me who I am") was necessarily false. In baptizing the young man, the church had staked a clear claim to tell him who he was.³¹

As those who have been baptized, we do not have the right to "choose for ourselves" whom we will serve or how we will serve. We are members of Christ's army, men and women under authority, who have been given our marching orders in the Scriptures. We must march in step with our commander or face the consequences. Within the church there is no room for compromise. Our devotion and loyalty must be uniquely committed to the Lord. Within our hearts we must be aware of our own idolatries and root them out remorselessly through the repeated application of the Truth, God's Word. Moreover, we need to practice in our churches the kind of challenging preaching and biblical church discipline that confronts people's comfortable idolatries with the truth of God's wrath and the danger of being deceived into thinking that such idolatry can safely coexist with a Christian profession of faith. As Richard Lovelace puts it:

We may need to challenge more, and comfort less, in our evangelism and discipleship. We need to make it harder for people to retain assurance of salvation when they move into serious sin. . . . We need to tell some persons who think they have gotten saved to get lost. The Puritans were biblically realistic about this; we have become sloppy and sentimental in promoting assurance under any circumstances.³²

A proper attitude toward idolatry outside the church. Yet that does not mean that we must adopt a belligerent attitude to members of other religions. As we have already noted, Paul's attitude among the philosophers of Mars Hill in Athens, recorded in Acts 17, was different both from that of Ezekiel's vision and his own attitude toward the Corinthians. Surrounded by the temples of false religion, far from calling down fire and brimstone on them, he instead addressed them respectfully as people who were very religious (Acts 17:22). His attitude to idolatry *outside* the church was thus radically different to idolatry *inside* the church. To the pagans he spoke with great politeness, seeking to present the gospel to them in a winsome manner. But to those who sought to bring pagan practices from the outside into the church, he had no tolerance.

Similarly, we should be polite and respectful in our dealings with people who are not Christians. Whether they come to your door attempting to share their faith with you or you encounter them in your regular course of life, your motto should be 1 Peter 3:15–16: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander." Yet as we answer them with politeness and gentleness, we must be under no illusions that they are simply seeking God by a different route, far less that "it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere." On the contrary, we are to remember with Peter that there is a judgment coming that begins "with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?" (1 Peter 4:17).

Ezekiel 10–11

I LOOKED, AND I SAW the likeness of a throne of sapphire above the expanse that was over the heads of the cherubim. ²The LORD said to the man clothed in linen, "Go in among the wheels beneath the cherubim. Fill your hands with burning coals from among the cherubim and scatter them over the city." And as I watched, he went in.

³Now the cherubim were standing on the south side of the temple when the man went in, and a cloud filled the inner court. ⁴Then the glory of the LORD rose from above the cherubim and moved to the threshold of the temple. The cloud filled the temple, and the court was full of the radiance of the glory of the LORD. ⁵The sound of the wings of the cherubim could be heard as far away as the outer court, like the voice of God Almighty when he speaks.

⁶When the LORD commanded the man in linen, "Take fire from among the wheels, from among the cherubim," the man went in and stood beside a wheel. ⁷Then one of the cherubim reached out his hand to the fire that was among them. He took up some of it and put it into the hands of the man in linen, who took it and went out. ⁸(Under the wings of the cherubim could be seen what looked like the hands of a man.)

⁹I looked, and I saw beside the cherubim four wheels, one beside each of the cherubim; the wheels sparkled like chrysolite. ¹⁰As for their appearance, the four of them looked alike; each was like a wheel intersecting a wheel. ¹¹As they moved, they would go in any one of the four directions the cherubim faced; the wheels did not turn about as the cherubim went.

The cherubim went in whatever direction the head faced, without turning as they went. ¹²Their entire bodies, including their backs, their hands and their wings, were completely full of eyes, as were their four wheels. ¹³I heard the wheels being called "the whirling wheels." ¹⁴Each of the cherubim had four faces: One face was that of a cherub, the second the face of a man, the third the face of a lion, and the fourth the face of an eagle.

¹⁵Then the cherubim rose upward. These were the living creatures I had seen by the Kebar River. ¹⁶When the cherubim moved, the wheels beside them moved; and when the cherubim spread their wings to rise from the ground, the wheels did not leave their side. ¹⁷When the cherubim stood still, they also stood still; and when the cherubim rose, they rose with them, because the spirit of the living creatures was in them.

¹⁸Then the glory of the LORD departed from over the threshold of the temple and stopped above the cherubim. ¹⁹While I watched, the cherubim spread their wings and rose from the ground, and as they went, the wheels went with them. They stopped at the entrance to the east gate of the LORD's house, and the glory of the God of Israel was above them.

²⁰These were the living creatures I had seen beneath the God of Israel by the Kebar River, and I realized that they were cherubim. ²¹Each had four faces and four wings, and under their wings was what looked like the hands of a man. ²²Their faces had the same appearance as those I had seen by the Kebar River. Each one went straight ahead.

11:1Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me to the gate of the house of the LORD that faces east. There at the entrance to the gate were twenty-five men, and I saw among them Jaazaniah son of Azzur and Pelatiah son of Benaiah, leaders of the people. ²The LORD said to me, "Son of man, these are the men who are plotting evil and giving wicked advice in this city. ³They say, 'Will it not soon be time to build houses? This city is a cooking pot, and we are the meat.' ⁴Therefore prophesy against them; prophesy, son of man."

⁵Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon me, and he told me to say: "This is what the LORD says: That is what you are saying, O house of Israel, but I know what is going through your mind. ⁶You have killed many people in this city and filled its streets with the dead.

7"Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: The bodies you have thrown there are the meat and this city is the pot, but I will drive you out of it. ⁸You fear the sword, and the sword is what I will bring against you, declares the Sovereign LORD. 9I will drive you out of the city and hand you over to foreigners and inflict punishment on you. ¹⁰You will fall by the sword, and I will execute judgment on you at the borders of Israel. Then you will know that I am the LORD. ¹¹This city will not be a pot for you, nor will you be the meat in it; I will execute judgment on you at the borders of Israel. ¹²And you will know that I am the LORD, for you have not followed my decrees or kept my laws but have conformed to the standards of the nations around you."

¹³Now as I was prophesying, Pelatiah son of Benaiah died. Then I fell facedown and cried out in a loud voice, "Ah, Sovereign LORD! Will you completely destroy the remnant of Israel?"

¹⁴The word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁵"Son of man, your brothers—your brothers who are your blood relatives and the whole house of Israel—are

those of whom the people of Jerusalem have said, 'They are far away from the LORD; this land was given to us as our possession.'

16"Therefore say: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Although I sent them far away among the nations and scattered them among the countries, yet for a little while I have been a sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone.'

17"Therefore say: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you back the land of Israel again.'

¹⁸"They will return to it and remove all its vile images and detestable idols. ¹⁹I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. ²⁰Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God. ²¹But as for those whose hearts are devoted to their vile images and detestable idols, I will bring down on their own heads what they have done, declares the Sovereign LORD."

²²Then the cherubim, with the wheels beside them, spread their wings, and the glory of the God of Israel was above them. ²³The glory of the LORD went up from within the city and stopped above the mountain east of it. ²⁴The Spirit lifted me up and brought me to the exiles in Babylonia in the vision given by the Spirit of God.

Then the vision I had seen went up from me, ²⁵and I told the exiles everything the LORD had shown me.

Original Meaning

WHILE FOR THE purposes of simplicity we have treated Ezekiel 8–9 separately from Ezekiel 10–11, it must not be forgotten that they belong together as a single vision. In fact, there is a structure underlying the whole sequence of these four chapters, which may be analyzed as follows:

- A: Introduction to the vision, including reference to divine glory (8:1–4)
 - B: Four visions of cultic abominations, along with accusations of social wrongdoing, centering on the elders (8:5–18)
 - C: A vision of divine judgment on account of cultic abominations and social wrongdoing, beginning with the elders (9:1–10:7)
 - D: The prophet intercedes with God to preserve a remnant (9:8)
 - E: The departure of the divine glory from the temple and city (10:8–22)
 - B': Accusation of social wrongdoing, centering on the leaders of the people (11:1–6)
 - C': A message of divine judgment on the leaders, followed by a vision of divine judgment on Pelatiah, one of the "leaders of the people" (s'ārê hā'ām; 11:7–13)
 - D': The prophet intercedes with God to preserve a remnant (11:13)
 - E': The promise of the divine presence with the exiles as a temporary "sanctuary" and the eventual return of the exiles (11:14–21)
- A': Conclusion of the vision, including reference to the divine glory (11:22–25)

The structure of the vision makes its fundamental message clear: It is about the location of the presence of God. If God were still present in his temple in Jerusalem, then the confidence of those who remain in the land would perhaps be justified. But what this temple vision shows conclusively is that because of the sins of the inhabitants of Judah, both in terms of their responsibilities toward God and of their responsibilities toward their fellow human beings, the glory has departed from Judah and gone to dwell with those living in exile. The first have become the last and the last have become first.

Chapter 10 opens with a continuation of the judgment scene of Ezekiel 9. There we saw the city being overrun by divinely appointed executioners, scattering dead bodies in their wake as if starring in a cosmic *Rambo* movie. Now, on top of that destruction of life, follows the destruction of property. The seventh angel returns to the fray. This is a priestly figure, who in Ezekiel 9 is the sole mediator of life in the midst of the cataclysm, marking out for salvation those who sigh and mourn over the abominations of the city. This time, however, his action is not intended for salvation but for destruction. At the Lord's command, he takes burning coals from beneath the heavenly throne in order to burn the city to the ground (10:2). Like the city of Sodom, who Ezekiel calls Jerusalem's "sister" in 16:46, Jerusalem will be burned up by fire from on high.

Ezekiel is here simply giving us a glimpse behind the scenes at the cosmic realities that underlie history. When the physical Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar and was razed to the ground in 586 B.C., the Babylonians were nothing more than the human instruments in the hands of an angry God. In the ancient Near East, it was a commonplace that a city could not be captured unless its gods were either defeated or had abandoned it to its fate. Thus the Cyrus Cylinder, which records the victory of the Persians over Babylon in 539 B.C., tells how Marduk was angry at the cultic and social sins of the Babylonian king and therefore departed from the city, leading to its destruction and the annihilation of its population. Similarly here, the Lord's wrath at the sins of the people leads to his departure from his chosen city and its consequent destruction.

After the priestly figure departs to carry out the Lord's bidding, there follows a renewed description of the divine chariot with its supernatural attendants. The lengths to which the prophet goes to describe the vision of the divine glory may seem redundant to us, but they serve to underline its status as the central feature of the whole temple vision. What Ezekiel sees is exactly the same vision as he saw in chapter 1 (in Babylonia!), but here in

the temple context, certain features snap into sharper focus. In the building filled with representations of cherubim, it becomes clear to the prophet that the "living creatures" he saw in chapter 1 are themselves cherubim.³

On top of the cherubim, the prophet sees a throne, at first empty (Ezek. 10:1). The divine chariot is drawn up on the south side of the temple (10:3), as far away as possible from the abominations on the northern side of the city. Then Ezekiel sees a cloud filling the inner court and the glory of God on the move once more, just as it had been in the days of the desert wanderings (cf. Ex. 40:34–37). It departs slowly, haltingly, as if reluctant to leave.4 First it passes from the earthly cherubim in the Most Holy Place to the threshold of the temple (Ezek. 10:4), then from the threshold of the temple to the divine chariot over the (real) cherubim (10:18). From there the glory moves to the east gate of the temple courtyard (10:19), where there is a pause during which the prophet receives a further oracle and vision. Finally the glory moves on to the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, outside the city limits. The city itself is now effectively doomed, cut off from divine aid from its true protector, waiting for the ax to fall. The Lord has abandoned the city to the empty hope offered by the idols for which the people abandoned him.

Not everyone within the city of Jerusalem has the same perspective, however. At the entrance to the east gate, Ezekiel sees a group of men whose number (twenty-five, Ezek. 11:1) and whose function (giving advice, v. 2) suggest them to be elders. Included in their number are two "leaders of the people" ($s'\bar{a}r\hat{e}\ h\bar{a}'\bar{a}m$), who are named as Jaazaniah ben Azzur (not the same as Jaazaniah ben Shaphan in 8:11) and Pelatiah. The "leaders" ($s'\bar{a}r\hat{i}m$) were a small council of high officials of the king, who wielded considerable power in Judah. During the reign of Zedekiah, they apparently extended their powers in the face of his weakness and were even able to act independently of the king to some degree (see Jer. 38:25).

In the vision, Ezekiel is told that these leaders have been "plotting evil and giving wicked advice in this city" (Ezek. 11:2). In opposition to the prophetic word of forthcoming judgment on Jerusalem, they have apparently been arrogantly asserting the security of their position. The exact meaning of the terse expression in 11:3a (lit., "not near building houses") has been much debated. The NIV, along with most translations and commentators, takes the "near" in a temporal sense, construing the phrase

as a question: "Will it not soon be time to build houses?" However, a better sense is obtained if "near" is taken in a spatial sense, so that the inhabitants of Judah are referring to themselves as those who are "near," in contrast to the exiles as those who are "far away" (cf. 11:15). The phrase then becomes, "It is not for the one who is near to build houses," with an obvious reference to the letter that Jeremiah sent the exiles urging them to "build houses" (Jer. 29:5). As Fairbairn paraphrases it: "Those who are far off in the land of exile may, if they please, take the prophet's advice and set about building houses for themselves; that does not concern us." 10

This understanding seems to fit better with the second half of their statement: "This city is a cooking pot, and we are the meat" (Ezek. 11:3b). This may be interpreted as a statement of the relative value of those who remain in Jerusalem and the exiles (the best part, the "meat," is put in the cooking pot while the undesired portion, the offal, is thrown into the fire). Alternatively, it may speak of the relative safety of the Jerusalemites (the cooking pot, while not a safe place to be, is at least better than being in the fire—as is implied in our proverb "Out of the frying pan, into the fire), or it may imply both. In either case, a contrast is implied between those who remain in Jerusalem and the exiles, a contrast that favors the inhabitants of the city.

To pick up the further quotation of their thoughts in 11:15, on the Jerusalemites' view, "They [the exiles] are¹⁴ far away from the LORD; this land was given to us as our possession." On the grounds that "possession is nine-tenths of the law," they regard the de facto situation as an expression of God's favor on them and displeasure with those in exile. They think of themselves as the true remnant while those in exile are under God's judgment.

In the oracle that follows, the Lord rejects their claim. Because of the violent crimes committed by these leaders, by which they have filled the city with corpses, the city will provide no protection for them (11:7). The sword that they fear will come on them and they will fall by it (11:8, 10). The land will not be their possession; rather, the Lord will bring them out of the city to judge them at the very edge of the land, at the "borders of Israel" (11:10–11).

In this prophecy there is not simply reference to the actual events of history, whereby many of the leading citizens were put to death by

Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah (2 Kings 25:21), but more fundamentally there is a challenge to the Jerusalemites' claim to possess the land. The language is carefully chosen to depict their fate as a kind of anti-exodus. The Lord will "drive them out of the city," just as he earlier brought Israel out of the land of Egypt (Ezek. 11:9; cf. Ex. 6:6). Whereas once he promised to deliver Israel from the hand of the Egyptians (Ex. 3:8), now he threatens to give them into the hand of foreigners (Ezek. 11:9). The judgments that once fell on Egypt (Ex. 6:6; 12:12) now fall on the inhabitants of Jerusalem (Ezek. 11:10). In this context, the phrase "the borders of Israel" evokes the division of the land under Joshua, where the borders of all of the tribes were established (Josh. 15–19; cf. Ezek. 48!). Far from the land of Canaan being their "possession" (Ezek. 11:15; cf. Ex. 6:8), which they may divide among themselves without regard to the exiles, the inhabitants of Jerusalem will die outside the land because of their failure to keep the Lord's decrees and laws. It will be shown that they are not a privileged "remnant" after all.

Ezekiel then once more sees enacted in visionary form God's judgment. As in Ezekiel 9, where he saw the idolatrous elders cut down as the firstfruits of God's judgment (9:6), so also here he sees one of the "leaders of the people," Pelatiah, die while Ezekiel is carrying out the Lord's command to prophesy against him (11:4). In both instances, Ezekiel's response to this demonstration of the reality of God's judgment is to fall on his face and cry out the question: "Sovereign LORD! Will you completely destroy the remnant of Israel?" (11:13; cf. 9:8). Up to a point, Ezekiel shares the presuppositions of the Jerusalemites. God's land and God's people are an indivisible unity. Those already in exile are therefore, by definition, "far from God." If then, in addition to the previous catastrophe, comprehensive judgment falls on those who remain in the land, who will be left? Surely the whole house of Israel will then be destroyed. The end of the tunnel will have been reached, with no way out.

The Lord responded with words of judgment without compassion—yet the reappearance of the priestly figure with his writing kit left room for hope that some righteous remnant might have been found to survive the holocaust (9:9–11). But the response to Ezekiel's second cry (11:13) is a glorious declaration that the future of Israel lies among the exiles: It is Ezekiel and his brothers and "blood relatives" —his fellow exiles—who constitute "the whole house of Israel" (11:15). Yes, they have been sent far

away from the land of Israel, but even there they have not been cast out of the Lord's presence because "for a little while I have been a sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone" (11:16). By this we see that the Lord's movement is not simply a departure *from* Jerusalem, on account of the idolatries that have profaned the sanctuary there (8:6), but also a departure *to* Babylon, to be a sanctuary for his true people there.

But the Lord's exile, like that of his true people, is only a temporary state of affairs.¹⁷ The counterpart of the anti-exodus of the Lord's nonpeople from Judah will be a new exodus of the Lord's true people from all the nations to which they have been scattered. They will be brought back once more (11:17; cf. Ex. 6:6); the land that Ezekiel cannot redeem for his redemption relatives (Ezek. 11:15) will be redeemed for them by the Lord (cf. Ex. 6:6).¹⁸ The detestable idols and vile images with which the former inhabitants filled the land (Ezek. 7:20; 8:3–17) will be removed by the new inhabitants (11:18).

The reason for this change in behavior is, quite literally, a change of heart. The Lord will create in his new people "an undivided heart," not so much in the sense of mutual agreement among the people, but rather in the sense of undivided loyalty to the Lord, a single-minded commitment to him (cf. Jer. 32:39). In place of the old spirit, whose mindset resulted in death (Ezek. 11:5–6), God's new people will be given "a new spirit." They will receive "a heart of flesh" that will respond to the Lord in place of their old stony heart (cf. 3:7). In contrast to the present occupants of the land, who neither follow the Lord's decrees nor keep his laws (11:12), his new people will observe both decrees and laws (11:20). The result of such renewal will be nothing less than the fulfillment of the goal of the first exodus: "They will be my people, and I will be their God" (11:20; cf. Ex. 6:7). This is the first substantive indication in Ezekiel of a solid hope for the future for God's people in exile.

There is, however, no such promising hope for those who remain in the land: They remain committed to idolatry and abominations, for which the judgment they receive will be fully deserved (Ezek. 11:21). Thus ends Ezekiel's temple vision: The glory departs from the temple and moves off onto the Mount of Olives, across from Jerusalem, as if waiting to see the judgment on the rebellious city completed, while the prophet is returned to his own people in exile.

Bridging Contexts

DIVINE ABANDONMENT and identification. The temptation to believe that God is statically tied to one location is not one that immediately occurs to us. Yet that difference of perspective is not simply a matter of "evolutionary progress" in our thought, as if modern people like us have advanced beyond such "primitive" ideas. Solomon himself recognized the incongruity of supposing that the One who created the universe would dwell in a house made with human hands (1 Kings 8:27). Yet he also recognized that the Lord had chosen to link himself and his honor in a unique way with the temple in Jerusalem. It was the place he had chosen to set his Name (1 Kings 8:29; cf. Deut. 12:11), the sole place where sacrifices were to be offered to the Lord.

It was therefore no light thing when Solomon's successors repeatedly failed to honor the temple as such, allowing or even encouraging idolatry and syncretistic worship at the high places throughout the land. If God really were the true God and not simply an ineffectual idol, such a history of unfaithfulness and abominations, which culminated in Ezekiel's vision of chapter 8, could only lead to disaster. So it did in 586 B.C. The One who had sovereignly set his Name on Jerusalem could, and finally did, remove his favor and protection.

It is hard for us, as modern people, to relate to the scale of such a catastrophe in the minds of God's people. Yet Ezekiel's message was not simply one of divine abandonment. It was also one of divine identification. God was leaving Jerusalem to its fate but he was not leaving himself without a remnant. The answer to Ezekiel's twice-posed question: "Are you going to destroy the entire remnant of Israel?" was "Yes and No." Yes, the remnant who remained in Judah were slated for further catastrophic judgment, from which the survival of any was an entirely moot prospect.²⁰ But no, that did not mean the end for God's people. A remnant already existed in exile, who would experience God's presence with them in exile for a little while, after which there would be a new exodus and a return to the Promised Land.

God's true presence among the human race. But even the experience of exile and return did not bring about the full blessings of the covenant. True, there was a kind of "second exodus" during the time of Cyrus, with the return of many Jews to their homeland (Ezra 1).²¹ With the

encouragement of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the second temple was built. Yet there is a pervasive feeling of incompleteness in the postexilic writings—a sense that there is something more to come.²² There was no physical manifestation of the Lord's presence in the second temple to match that at the dedication of the first temple (1 Kings 8:11) or that expected by Ezekiel (Ezek. 43:1–5).

That fulfillment awaited the New Testament era. With the coming of Jesus, the presence of God is no longer located in the physical, man-made temple, but the presence once again "made [a] dwelling" (lit., "tabernacled") among his people (John 1:14), just as it had during the desert period and, according to Ezekiel 11:16, during the Exile. In the person of Jesus, God's presence is once more mobile, no longer tied to a mountain, whether Mount Gerazim or Mount Zion; the time has now come when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth (John 4:23). In Jesus is also the coming of the glory that Ezekiel looked for. Thus John comments: "We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). In other words, with the coming of Jesus there is a fundamental redemptive-historical change in the manifestation of God's glory and presence.

If, however, Jesus is the personal manifestation of the divine glory in the New Testament, then this passage in Ezekiel 10–11 casts a fascinating light on Matthew 23:37–24:3. There Jesus laments Jerusalem's history of hard-heartedness towards the prophets and her refusal to come to him (23:37). As a result, her house will be left desolate (23:38), and Jerusalem will not see Jesus again until they are willing to welcome his coming (23:39). He then prophesies the forthcoming destruction of the temple (24:1) and removes himself to the Mount of Olives. Once more, the glory has departed from Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives, leaving behind a magnificent but doomed structure.

Names. From our modern perspective, we may also easily miss the appropriateness that marks the personal names of those singled out for judgment. Old Testament narratives often have names that fit and prefigure the action to unfold. Thus when an Old Testament audience read that Esau was given his name because it apparently means "hairy" and Jacob was sonamed because it was understood to mean "he grasps the heel" (or "deceives," Gen. 25:25–26), that information would have been immediately

recognized as significant for the story that follows, in which Jacob cheats Esau out of his inheritance by pretending to be the hairy brother (27:23). Similarly, the identification "Saul" (meaning "asked for/dedicated to") is on one level deeply appropriate for the king that Israel asked God to provide for them (1 Sam. 8:5), yet raises the question of Saul's dedication to God. At the same time, however, the alert Hebrew reader remembers that 1 Samuel 1:27–28 has already identified Samuel as the one "asked for" from God and "dedicated to" ($\check{s}\check{a}$ ' $\hat{u}l$) him, whereby God is suggesting that Samuel may be a better "Saul" than Saul himself.

In the light of this, we should probably not regard the personal names in Ezekiel 8–11 as mere social identifiers. Though the persons involved were presumably real historical figures (like Saul and Jacob), their names underline the message. For if Jaazaniah ben Azzur means "the LORD hears, son of [divine name] helps," it is hardly coincidental that the Lord has indeed heard. He has heard not just what Jaazaniah and the other elders have been saying but even the thoughts of their hearts. The absence of a specific divine name element in his patronym (Azzur) may not immediately appear significant, but is perfectly fitting in this context where the question of which deity these people have been seeking their help from is left open. Moreover, Pelatiah ben Benaiah means "the LORD delivers [causes to escape], son of the LORD builds up," yet he is the one who derides the Lord's command to build and does not escape. In every respect, the judgment of God exactly fits those on whom it falls.²⁴

Contemporary Significance

THE VEIL PULLED BACK. In the Wizard of Oz Dorothy and her three friends, the tin man, the scarecrow, and the cowardly lion, journey along the yellow brick road until they arrive at the famed city of Oz, where they hope that the powerful wizard will grant them their heart's desire. When they arrive, the enigmatic wizard appears to them in a variety of fearsome and beautiful forms and sends them off on a quest to prove themselves by disposing of the wicked witch of the west; if they succeed, he promises to grant them their wish. However, when they finally return after having successfully completed their mission and enter the great and mighty wizard's throne room, Dorothy's dog Toto pulls back a curtain in the corner. In that way, the foursome learns that the "great and mighty wizard" is in fact a failed

fairground conjurer, who does everything by illusion. With the screen taken away, they discover that the world of Oz is not at all what they thought it was.

In Ezekiel 8–11, the screen is taken away from the course of Judah's history, and it is revealed to the prophet that things are not at all what they had appeared to be. The fundamental reality that Judah had always relied upon, the presence of God in their midst in the temple on Mount Zion, is revealed to be now nothing more than a hollow shell. The glory of God has departed from their midst, leaving the city ripe for destruction. What that means is that those who seem to themselves to be in the better situation—in the frying pan rather than in the fire, those confidently depending on God's commitment to Zion—are actually next on the menu. God has abandoned them to their doom. To continue the culinary metaphor, their goose is cooked.

By contrast, the ones who seem like the offscouring and leftovers—those who seem to be abandoned by God and sent off into exile—are actually the ones with whom the future of God's people rests. For God has not simply departed from Jerusalem, he has departed to the exiles, to be their sanctuary. Because God is with them, they have a future, a future that will bring them back to the land of promise and to receive the goal of the promise: God's dwelling in the midst of his people. The rejected ones are those invited to the banquet, while those who felt secure will be rejected (Luke 14:16–24).

Most of us see life with the screen up. We assume that things are as they appear and that we can easily identify those on whom God's favor rests. We may put our confidence in the traditions of the past, for example, and assume that forms hallowed by repeated usage must be pleasing to God in the present. How far in the past we look may vary from person to person: We may insist on forms that stretch all the way back to the early church, the Reformation, or the Puritans, or simply the forms to which we have been accustomed as individuals. Alternatively, we may place our trust in numbers: If many people attend a particular church or type of church, then surely God's blessing rests on it and we should model our church after that style.

God's presence is not so easily discerned. He does not always continue to bless forms and institutions that he has blessed in the past, nor is he always found in the large and apparently successful churches. In the Bible, he is most often found with the poor and the weak, the despised and rejected, those whom the world regards as castoffs. So when Jesus comes, he visits the temple, but his primary teaching and ministry takes place in the open air. He will eat with the scribes and the Pharisees when they invite him, but he is known rather as the friend of tax collectors and sinners (Matt. 11:19). When he seeks twelve disciples, he goes not to the religious training schools but to the work places of ordinary men and women. The essence of his training program is not a rigorous course of book study, but three years of being in his presence.

The temple in the New Testament era. The reason for this is that in the New Testament the temple has taken human form in the body of Jesus (John 2:19). In him, God's glory lives among us (1:14). Herod's temple, for all its outward glory, is an empty shell, abandoned by God and now simply awaiting its destruction by human hands (Matt. 24:1–2). Ironically, it still stood while Christ experienced the heartrending abandonment on the cross, where his Father forsook him on account of the sins of his people. Its stones remained intact while his physical body was torn down. But that divine abandonment of Christ was only the necessary precursor to its refilling with even greater glory and resurrection as a spiritual body.

As a result of that death and resurrection, the future lies not with the Jerusalem temple but with the body of Christ, the church. In their assembly, they have the presence of God with them in the person of Jesus. This is the significance of Jesus' statement that "where two are three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matt. 18:20). Paul describes the church in this way: "We are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people' " (2 Cor. 6:16). Wherever the true church assembles, there God is present in their midst. Or, to put it the other way around, it is the presence of Christ that constitutes the church.

The prerequisite, then, for worship to be possible in the New Testament context is not a building chosen by God and accepted by him, but a people chosen by God and accepted by him. God dwells in the hearts of his people, not in a building made with hands. This surely has implications for how we assess different churches. All too often we make our judgment based on whether the programs a church offers seem to meet our needs or on its

denominational label, rather than attempting the harder task of discerning the reality of Christ's presence.

But how do you discern the reality of Christ's presence in a church? The Reformers argued that the marks of the true church were the pure preaching of the Word of God, the sacraments rightly administered, and church discipline properly applied.²⁵ These are not three entirely separate things, since pure preaching ought to result in reformation of sacramental practice, and laxness over church discipline will necessarily affect the administration of the sacraments. However, these marks provide us with a good place to start in assessing the health or otherwise of a church. The ministry of the Word and the sacraments are the two means of grace by which the Lord feeds his people, so that where the Lord is present, we should expect to find both sound preaching and a proper administration of the Lord's Supper and of baptism.

Moreover, Ezekiel's message should underline for us the essential importance of personal and corporate holiness, which is addressed by (among other things) proper church discipline. God's presence in the midst of his people is not to be taken lightly or presumed upon. Those at Pergamum who were treating idolatry and immorality within the church carelessly are warned in Revelation 2:16 to repent, lest Jesus should come and fight against them with the sword of his mouth. God's presence can be removed from a church, just as it abandoned the temple, leading to that church becoming nothing more than a hollow shell. Outwardly, everything may still seem to be in place, but without the internal reality of God's presence it is merely a matter of time before the whole edifice collapses.

Hope for believers. Yet while there is no room for complacency, there is solid hope for the believer in the most trying of times. For even while God may abandon parts of his professing church, he never abandons his covenant commitment to save for himself a people. If the religious leaders of the day and the major denominations turn their backs on him, he will leave them to their fate—but only in order to do a new work through the small and despised, those neglected and considered insignificant. God will choose the weak in order to shame the strong (1 Cor. 1:27). If the Jews will not receive their Messiah, then the gospel will go to the Gentiles. If the West turns its back on Christianity, then God will open up new doors in the other two-thirds of the world. In every generation, God's work of giving to

men and women a new spirit and a new heart continues until the full harvest of his people is brought into his kingdom.

The exact formulation of that renewing work in Ezekiel 11:19 is striking. Literally, it reads "I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and I will give to them a heart of flesh." The stony heart, a heart that is unresponsive to God, is not in the deepest sense something natural to us. Rather a heart that responds joyfully and obediently to God's commands is "flesh of our flesh"—what we were created to be. Yet since the time of Adam's fall into sin our humanity has been so perverted that we have become "by nature objects of [God's] wrath" (Eph. 2:3). Unless God performs divine heart surgery on us, we cannot obey him or please him. What we need is not simply to keep a series of New Year's resolutions or to turn over some new leaves. We need radical surgery, nothing less than a new birth from above (John 3:3). Thanks be to God, therefore, for the gift of Jesus Christ, in whom we are a new creation, reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:17). As Calvin expressed it, in the form of a prayer:

Almighty God, as we have completely perished in our father Adam, and no part of us remains uncorrupted so long as we bear in both body and soul grounds for wrath, condemnation, and death, grant that, reborn in your Spirit, we may increasingly set aside our own will and spirit, and so submit ourselves to you that your Spirit may truly reign within us. And then grant, we pray, that we not be ungrateful to you, but, appreciating how invaluable is this blessing, may dedicate and direct our entire life to glorifying to your name in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.²⁶

Ezekiel 12:1-20

THE WORD OF THE LORD came to me: ²"Son of man, you are living among a rebellious people. They have eyes to see but do not see and ears to hear but do not hear, for they are a rebellious people.

³"Therefore, son of man, pack your belongings for exile and in the daytime, as they watch, set out and go from where you are to another place. Perhaps they will understand, though they are a rebellious house. ⁴During the daytime, while they watch, bring out your belongings packed for exile. Then in the evening, while they are watching, go out like those who go into exile. ⁵While they watch, dig through the wall and take your belongings out through it. ⁶Put them on your shoulder as they are watching and carry them out at dusk. Cover your face so that you cannot see the land, for I have made you a sign to the house of Israel."

⁷So I did as I was commanded. During the day I brought out my things packed for exile. Then in the evening I dug through the wall with my hands. I took my belongings out at dusk, carrying them on my shoulders while they watched.

⁸In the morning the word of the LORD came to me: ⁹"Son of man, did not that rebellious house of Israel ask you, 'What are you doing?'

¹⁰"Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: This oracle concerns the prince in Jerusalem and the whole house of Israel who are there.' ¹¹Say to them, 'I am a sign to you.'

"As I have done, so it will be done to them. They will go into exile as captives.

12"The prince among them will put his things on his shoulder at dusk and leave, and a hole will be

dug in the wall for him to go through. He will cover his face so that he cannot see the land. ¹³I will spread my net for him, and he will be caught in my snare; I will bring him to Babylonia, the land of the Chaldeans, but he will not see it, and there he will die. ¹⁴I will scatter to the winds all those around him —his staff and all his troops—and I will pursue them with drawn sword.

15"They will know that I am the LORD, when I disperse them among the nations and scatter them through the countries. ¹⁶But I will spare a few of them from the sword, famine and plague, so that in the nations where they go they may acknowledge all their detestable practices. Then they will know that I am the LORD."

¹⁷The word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁸"Son of man, tremble as you eat your food, and shudder in fear as you drink your water. ¹⁹Say to the people of the land: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says about those living in Jerusalem and in the land of Israel: They will eat their food in anxiety and drink their water in despair, for their land will be stripped of everything in it because of the violence of all who live there. ²⁰The inhabited towns will be laid waste and the land will be desolate. Then you will know that I am the LORD.'"

Original Meaning

THE MESSAGE OF Ezekiel 8–11 may well be summed up as: "Nothing escapes the Lord's notice." Contrary to public opinion in Jerusalem, which held, "The LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land" (Ezek. 8:12; cf. 9:9), the Lord had indeed seen everything and laid it out in a vision before his prophet. Likewise, the Lord's acute sense of hearing had picked up the pronouncements of the wicked counselors in 11:3, though he would be signally deaf to any cries for help from his people (8:18). Because of

their abominations and idolatry, he would indeed abandon the land, leaving it at the mercy of the Babylonian army. This was the message that Ezekiel was to bring to the exiles; it was a vision intended for their ears (11:25).

But if Ezekiel cherished any hopes of seeing a revolutionary change in the thinking of the exiles as a result of his message, he is quickly disabused of his notions in chapter 12. Like the Jerusalemites, his fellow exiles are a rebellious people. They do not see what the Lord shows them, nor do they hear what the Lord says, not because they lack the physical organs of sight and hearing, but simply because they are rebellious (12:2). They have eyes to see but they do not see; ears to hear but they do not hear (12:2). In the language of 11:19, they are still characterized by the heart of stone, a stubborn will that rejects obedience.

This saying of 12:2 underlies the sign-acts that follow it. This section is made up of a sign-act of exile (12:3–7), the interpretation of this sign-act (12:8–17), and a second sign-act of fear and trembling (12:18–20). The dominant motif throughout is of looking and not seeing. Repeatedly, Ezekiel is instructed to carry out his actions "as they watch" (*l**'enêhem, seven times in 12:3–7). His actions are not particularly obscure, depicting as they do an event in which the exiles had all personally taken part. Yet the result of his actions, noted by the Lord in verse 8, is not dawning comprehension on the part of the exiles but inability to understand. They ask him: "What are you doing?" Nor does the second sign-act make things clearer to them. Though they have seen with their eyes what he has done, they still do not get the message.

What is more, even when he delivers the word of the Lord to them, explaining in oracular form what the sign-act means, the people's response is that recorded in 12:27: "The vision he sees is for many years from now, and he prophesies about the distant future." Though they hear every word he speaks, it is clear that they have understood nothing at all. Indeed, they are a rebellious people, who have ears and do not hear, eyes and do not see.

The initial sign-act that the prophet performs depicts the action of going into exile. Ezekiel is first to put together an exile's pack, containing the few belongings an exile might be able to carry along on the long journey. This may consist simply of an animal skin to hold food and act as a pillow, a mat to lie on, and a bowl out of which to eat and drink. These preparations are to be made in the daytime, though the departure is delayed until evening.

This delay serves both the practical purpose of allowing time for a crowd to gather to witness the sign-act and a symbolic purpose, representing God's delaying of judgment until the proper time, the gathering gloom of evening (12:4).²

The growing darkness provides a frighteningly appropriate backdrop for the drama. At that time, Ezekiel is to dig through the adobe wall of his house and go out through it, taking his pack with him (12:5). Moreover, he is to cover his face so that he cannot see the land (12:6). All of this has symbolic meaning: The Jerusalemites and their prince will go into exile just as he has acted out (v. 11).

The symbolic meaning of the otherwise rather enigmatic sign is expounded in 12:10–16. It concerns the fate of Zedekiah, the prince $(n\bar{a}s\,\hat{i}^2)$, along with the house of Israel in Jerusalem (12:10). Many of the details of the sign-act are capable of more than one interpretation. Does the breaking through the wall symbolize something Zedekiah does in his attempt to escape³ or the breaches made by the Babylonians through which they bring out their prisoner?⁴ Does the covering of his face represent an attempt at concealment,⁵ or shame and grief?⁶

Some of these complexities may be due to reading the text in the light of its historical fulfillment recorded in 2 Kings 25:4–7; however, some are due to the prophet's penchant for complex, multivalent images, which involve plays on words and sounds. Thus the prince $(n\bar{a}s'\hat{i}^2)$ is both the one who "lifts up" $(yis's'\bar{a}^2)$ his pack and also "the burden" $(m\bar{a}s's'\bar{a}^2)$ to be carried (Ezek. 12:10, 12). He is both the one who goes out and the one who is brought out, as a literal translation of verse 12 makes clear: "As for the prince who is among them, he will lift up [his pack] upon his shoulder in the darkness and he will go out; through the wall they will dig to bring [him] out through it."

Though the imagery is complex, the essential message seems reasonably straightforward. Not only will there be a further exile, bringing out those still remaining in Jerusalem and Judah, but this anti-exodus will center on the person of the prince, Zedekiah. His personal transgressions have not yet been the object of Ezekiel's prophecies (though they will be later on, e.g., in Ezek. 17 and 19). Here he is in view primarily as the representative of the people. Because he shares their inability to see the coming judgment, that judgment will take the form of no longer being able to see the land, that is,

he will never return from exile. This motif is found regularly in extrabiblical curses¹¹ and was fulfilled historically when the Babylonians blinded Zedekiah at Riblah and took him into exile, never to return (2 Kings 25:7).

All this will happen not because of the desire of Nebuchadnezzar for a little more *Lebensraum* ("room to live"), as Adolf Hitler later designated his expansionist ambitions. More fundamentally, it is because the Lord has set a snare for Zedekiah and for the people he represents (Ezek. 12:13). The Lord is the One who will bring Zedekiah to Babylonia and will scatter his forces to the winds, pursuing him with drawn sword (12:14). The Lord is the One who will disperse his followers among the nations, a mere handful surviving Ezekiel's favorite apocalyptic triad of "sword, famine and plague" (12:15-16). These (lit.) "men of number" ('anšê mispār; i.e., a number small enough to be counted) will "acknowledge" (yesapperû) among the nations their abominations and come to acknowledge the Lord's preeminence (12:16). The implication is not necessarily that they will exhibit repentance for their actions but that at least they will recognize that it is the Lord who has acted against them. Their defeat and dispersal are evidence of the Lord's wrath in action, evidence aimed at curing the willful obtuseness of those remaining in Judah.

To this initial sign-act and interpretation, a further one is then added: Ezekiel is to eat and drink with trembling and shuddering, depicting the anxiety that the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah will feel. The violence with which they have filled the land will return on their own heads, with the towns being destroyed and the land devastated. This time, however, those emerging from the devastation with a knowledge of the Lord's preeminence are not those in Judah but "the people of the land" (v. 19), that is, the exiles. The land of Judah and all who remain in it are doomed. They are not to be the objects of envy, as the exiles must have been tempted to view them, but rather of horror and pity. At the same time, those whom the inhabitants of Judah would have regarded as landless unfortunates will turn out to be the inheritors of the land (11:16–17).¹²

God is not impotent even in the face of ears that will not hear and eyes that will not see; one way or another, he will get his message through. The exiles will come to see that they indeed are the fortunate ones who have escaped the total judgment of God on his rebellious people. But in order for

them to receive their inheritance in the land, God must first of all act in judgment on those who remain. It is this unpalatable truth that they are so reluctant to see.

Bridging Contexts

THE NEED FOR and value of visual aids. In our churches, we are used to preaching to the converted. Few have experience of the difficult task of street preaching, attempting to bring God's message to an audience that, by and large, is not predisposed to listen. Those who do have such experience generally recognize the need to grab people's attention in some way. In some respects, therefore, Ezekiel's sign-acts functioned as a kind of "street theater," a means of drawing a crowd.

Yet Ezekiel's sketches were not merely a prelude to the message, they were themselves the message. Because of their vivid, visual nature, they were able to penetrate past the blind eyes and deaf ears into the consciousness beyond. These visual images would sit there, like the sower's seed, waiting to germinate into an awareness of the reality of God and of his purposes in history. God's self-revelation that "I am the LORD" was written on the life of his prophet; he was their "sign" (12:11). That "sign" would not bear the same kind of fruit in every life. The knowledge that "I am the LORD" was not necessarily a saving knowledge. Yet one way or another, through the actions of God in history, revealed first to his prophets, all would come to know that there is a God and there is a judgment on sin.

This is an unpalatable truth at all times and in all places. It is not just the modern era that finds it hard to accept that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). But perhaps particularly in the contemporary American setting, where positive thinking carries such weight, the language of sin and judgment is considered out of place. Thus Rabbi Harold Kushner's most recent book seeks to counter the notion "that God holds us to strict standards of Right and Wrong, that God knows every secret, nasty thing we ever do, even our secret, nasty thoughts, and that every sin separates us from God's love." Like the exiles of Ezekiel's day, Rabbi Kushner prefers to think rather more optimistically about the future. But the biblical perspective is ruthlessly honest about our own failures and their consequences. This truth is important because only those whose eyes

have been opened to the true danger of their position as objects of God's wrath will be persuaded to flee to the refuge God offers.

God's definitive "visual aids." Supremely, of course, God's self-revelation of his own existence and of the reality of judgment on sin comes through Jesus Christ. His life, death, and resurrection are God's ultimate acts of judgment on sin and salvation of his people. If sin does not separate us from God's love, why was Jesus separated from his Father on the cross? But also the resurrection demonstrates visibly God's acceptance of Jesus' death in place of his people. The cross and the empty tomb are God's definitive visual aids.

In the meantime, through the work of the Holy Spirit, God is opening the eyes and ears of the spiritually blind and deaf to the reality of salvation in Christ. Though his people may be despised and rejected by other people, like their Savior, they are accepted by God and incorporated into his family. On the last day, however, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:10–11). At that time the knowledge of his lordship will be universal.

In the meantime, we as the people of Jesus have a unique role to play as signs, as witnesses before a watching world (Acts 1:8). To the world around us, we are a letter from Christ, to use Paul's phrase (2 Cor. 3:3). That testimony, like Ezekiel's witness, must not only be verbal but also visual, aimed at the eye-gate and the ear-gate alike. This will be particularly true in cultures and locations that are not hospitable to our message. Words by themselves may suffice to communicate to those who have ears to hear, but those whose ears are tightly shut must see the Word become flesh again in the lives of his followers. We must speak clearly of the tragic and dangerous state of men and women without Christ: They are sinners under the wrath of God, at risk of eternal lostness. But we must also make visible clearly, in word and deed, the love of God demonstrated in this awesome fact, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8).

Contemporary Significance

God's Word becoming flesh. How do we demonstrate the reality of the Word who became flesh in our contemporary world? For Ezekiel, the word he received took flesh in his actions—actions that were uncomfortable and

costly (breaking through his own wall with his bare hands!), actions that were embarrassingly odd (pretending to go into exile, eating and drinking with violent trembling). Through his actions, along with the accompanying words, a message of judgment on their dearest hopes was imparted to his hearers, so that when God's judgment occurred, the people would know that God was the One who had brought it about. Ezekiel had to tear down the things on which his hearers depended in this present world, in order that they might see the greater thing that God wished to do in and through them.

For Jesus, the Word becoming flesh meant leaving the heavenly glory he shared with the Father to come to earth, taking on himself humanity with all its weaknesses and limitations. He was no armchair warrior; in his incarnation, he was willing to get down and dirty and become part of humankind, bearing the consequences of Adam's sin along with us. He experienced the frustrations of living in a world where things do not work as they ought to; he wept at the graveside of his friend Lazarus, overcome by the pain of human loss. He wrestled with the forces of evil and darkness and death and won the struggle, so that we might be liberated from our bondage to sin and take part in the new exodus of God's people. He died so that we might share in an exodus, not from Egypt or Babylon but out of the kingdom of this world into the kingdom of God. In his crucified flesh, he demonstrated both the judgment of God on sin and the love of God toward sinners.

How though does God's Word take flesh through us? Evangelicals have sometimes been accused of making the Word who became flesh back into words again. We can talk a good talk, but don't always have the walk to match it. A world with ears tightly closed against the truth needs to see the reality of our faith written in changed lives. It needs to see what Harvie Conn calls "show and tell" evangelism: costly witness in word and deed, where our deeds underline the reality of our words, while our words explain the meaning of our deeds.¹⁴

These actions need not be as peculiar or complex as Ezekiel's sign-acts. One church I know of offered free gift-wrapping at Christmastime at a local store, handing out also a leaflet about the real gift of Christmas. Another might offer a free car wash, while explaining our need as humans for the washing that Jesus offers. The church of which I was pastor in Oxford ministered to older people who had no connection with the church by

cutting their grass, as a means of demonstrating in practical ways the love of Jesus.

In this, we were simply following the ancient tradition of the church. The fourth-century emperor Julian complained to the pagan priests of his day that the "impious Galileans" were looking after the pagan poor as well as their own. Free service offered in self-sacrificial ways may indeed seem to many people as bizarre as Ezekiel's actions in an age where so many people are motivated solely by the bottom line. Yet it simply reflects the fact that word and deed together can penetrate to the heart in a way that words alone cannot.

Going out to people. As our culture becomes more and more opposed to the gospel, it will become more and more necessary to take the message out to people rather than waiting for them to come in to the church. Street preaching is one method, while street theater may also be a means of sparking spiritual conversations. These are not in any sense a substitute for the regular ministry of the church, but they are a means of bringing the gospel out to those who are a rebellious people, who have eyes to see but do not see, and ears to hear but do not hear (Ezek. 12:2).

However, even creative communication efforts cannot by themselves open up closed eyes. Even after we have shown the gospel and told the gospel, the fundamental truth remains that those around us are not merely spiritually blind and deaf but dead in their transgressions and sins (Eph. 2:1). What they need is not simply a vivid depiction of the truth of sin and judgment and God's love; rather, they need new hearts, something only God can give people. Unless the Lord opens their ears and eyes and hearts, all our labors will be in vain.

But what gives us hope in our evangelistic efforts is that God wants to bring men and women to know him, to see his hand as the Prime Mover in everything that happens in this world. Our task is not to sit about debating whether the size of that redeemed remnant will be few in number, but rather to enter the kingdom ourselves and make every effort to encourage others to do likewise in word and deed (Luke 13:23–24).

Ezekiel 12:21–13:23

The word of the LORD came to me: ²²"Son of man, what is this proverb you have in the land of Israel: 'The days go by and every vision comes to nothing'? ²³Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am going to put an end to this proverb, and they will no longer quote it in Israel.' Say to them, 'The days are near when every vision will be fulfilled. ²⁴For there will be no more false visions or flattering divinations among the people of Israel. ²⁵But I the LORD will speak what I will, and it shall be fulfilled without delay. For in your days, you rebellious house, I will fulfill whatever I say, declares the Sovereign LORD.'"

²⁶The word of the LORD came to me: ²⁷"Son of man, the house of Israel is saying, 'The vision he sees is for many years from now, and he prophesies about the distant future.'

²⁸"Therefore say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: None of my words will be delayed any longer; whatever I say will be fulfilled, declares the Sovereign LORD.'"

13:1The word of the LORD came to me: ²"Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who are now prophesying. Say to those who prophesy out of their own imagination: 'Hear the word of the LORD! ³This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing! ⁴Your prophets, O Israel, are like jackals among ruins. ⁵You have not gone up to the breaks in the wall to repair it for the house of Israel so that it will stand firm in the battle on the day of the LORD. ⁶Their visions are false and their divinations a lie. They say, "The LORD

declares," when the LORD has not sent them; yet they expect their words to be fulfilled. ⁷Have you not seen false visions and uttered lying divinations when you say, "The LORD declares," though I have not spoken?

8" 'Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Because of your false words and lying visions, I am against you, declares the Sovereign LORD. 9My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and utter lying divinations. They will not belong to the council of my people or be listed in the records of the house of Israel, nor will they enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Sovereign LORD.

10" 'Because they lead my people astray, saying, "Peace," when there is no peace, and because, when a flimsy wall is built, they cover it with whitewash, 11 therefore tell those who cover it with whitewash that it is going to fall. Rain will come in torrents, and I will send hailstones hurtling down, and violent winds will burst forth. 12 When the wall collapses, will people not ask you, "Where is the whitewash you covered it with?"

says: In my wrath I will unleash a violent wind, and in my anger hailstones and torrents of rain will fall with destructive fury. ¹⁴I will tear down the wall you have covered with whitewash and will level it to the ground so that its foundation will be laid bare. When it falls, you will be destroyed in it; and you will know that I am the LORD. ¹⁵So I will spend my wrath against the wall and against those who covered it with whitewash. I will say to you, "The wall is gone and so are those who whitewashed it, ¹⁶those prophets of Israel who prophesied to Jerusalem and

saw visions of peace for her when there was no peace, declares the Sovereign LORD."

¹⁷"Now, son of man, set your face against the daughters of your people who prophesy out of their own imagination. Prophesy against them ¹⁸ and say, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the women who sew magic charms on all their wrists and make veils of various lengths for their heads in order to ensnare people. Will you ensnare the lives of my people but preserve your own? ¹⁹You have profaned me among my people for a few handfuls of barley and scraps of bread. By lying to my people, who listen to lies, you have killed those who should not have died and have spared those who should not live.

says: I am against your magic charms with which you ensnare people like birds and I will tear them from your arms; I will set free the people that you ensnare like birds. ²¹I will tear off your veils and save my people from your hands, and they will no longer fall prey to your power. Then you will know that I am the LORD. ²²Because you disheartened the righteous with your lies, when I had brought them no grief, and because you encouraged the wicked not to turn from their evil ways and so save their lives, ²³therefore you will no longer see false visions or practice divination. I will save my people from your hands. And then you will know that I am the LORD.'"

Original Meaning

THE PROBLEM OF distinguishing between true and false prophecy had a long history in Israel. Alongside the true messenger of God, who brought God's word to his people, were many imitators who bore a message of a different

stamp. In Ezekiel 13, the prophet addresses the men and women who had appointed themselves Israel's spiritual guardians. First, however, he turns to address a related issue in 12:21–28, the cynicism and general confusion that resulted from the conflicting messages that the people were hearing.

Confusion Over Prophecy (12:21–28)

As HE DOES on a number of other occasions, Ezekiel addresses these issues by presenting two current popular sayings or slogans. (1) The first "proverb" of the people asserts the ineffectiveness of the prophetic word in general: "The days go by and every vision comes to nothing" (12:22). The people had grown so used to hearing visions proclaimed that never came about that some had come to the conclusion that all prophetic visions were nothing more than empty words. There was no such thing as genuine revelation from God, and the prophets could thus safely be disregarded. Time passed and nothing happened. Therefore, these people reckoned, nothing would ever happen. The Lord's response through Ezekiel to such people was to throw a slightly revised form of their saying back in their faces. By changing the verbs of their formulation, he affirms: "The days are near when [lit., and] every vision will be fulfilled" (12:23).

Indeed, every vision would be fulfilled because of a twofold action on the Lord's part. In the first place, there would be no more false visions or flattering divination among the people of Israel (12:24). The mention of the "false vision" ($h^2z on \check{saw}$) points forward to the worthless activities of the so-called "prophets of Israel," which are criticized in the next chapter (cf. 13:6), while with the expression "no more" ($l\bar{o}$)... ' $\hat{o}d$), we encounter a characteristic idiom of the prophet's contrast between the way things were in the past and the way they would be in the future. False prophecy would be silenced, so that the people might no longer be led astray by it. In addition, however, true prophecy would be vindicated: The Lord will speak, and what he speaks will happen with no more delay (12:25).

The people had grown tired of waiting so long for the Lord to act in fulfillment of the words of the true prophets (Hab. 2:2–3). When the prophesied judgment of Jerusalem took place and the false prophets were cut off, then the people would know who were the true prophets, and that they had indeed spoken at God's command (cf. Ezek. 2:5). This is God's answer to the skeptics of Ezekiel's day.

(2) Yet alongside these unbelievers was apparently a second party, the delayers. This group of people did not deny the effectiveness of the prophetic word in general. They simply hoped that this particular word of judgment would not take effect until a future generation. Their motto was, "The vision he sees is for many years from now, and he prophesies about the distant future" (12:27). Such an attitude was not without historical justification. Isaiah's prophecy to Hezekiah of a future Babylonian invasion of Judah and the enslavement of his descendants at their hands was recognized by Hezekiah as implying "peace in our time" (Isa. 39:5–8). Had not a whole series of prophets foretold the coming doom of Israel down through the years? Might not at least one more generation pass before the ax of judgment descended? This second group also receives a "no more" answer from the Lord: There will be no more delay; the Lord will fulfill whatever he has spoken (Ezek. 12:28).

The Lord's commitment to fulfill whatever he has spoken (12:25, 28) brings us to the crux of the issue between the true and the false prophets—the source of their words. Not every word spoken by someone claiming to be a prophet would be fulfilled, for not all spoke the word of the Lord. In order for every prophetic word to be fulfilled, it was necessary that judgment should come to silence the self-proclaimed prophets. This idea, mentioned in passing in 12:24, is unfolded throughout chapter 13 in two halves that show considerable symmetry. Ezekiel first addresses the false prophets ("the prophets of Israel," 13:1–16) and then the false prophetesses ("the daughters of your people who prophesy out of their own imagination," 13:17–23).

Address to the False Prophets of Israel (13:1–16)

THE VERY TITLE Ezekiel gives his opponents—"the prophets of Israel" (13:1)—raises a paradox. In spite of the existence of a body of men who could be addressed thus, their ineffectiveness to accomplish the Lord's purpose is such that he must still raise up someone like Ezekiel so that the people "will know that a prophet has been among them" (2:5).⁴ The foundational difference between Ezekiel and "the prophets of Israel" is the *origin* of their prophecy: The false prophets "prophesy out of their own imagination," whereas Ezekiel declares the vision that the Sovereign Lord has revealed to him (cf. 11:25).

In 13:3 Ezekiel calls these people "foolish prophets [a pun on the similar sounding words $n^eb\hat{i}\hat{i}m$, prophets, and $n^eb\bar{a}l\hat{i}m$, fools] who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing." They confidently proclaim the divine origin of their words, saying, "Hear the word of the LORD" (13:2), and using the oracle formula, "The LORD declares" (13:6–7). They even hope to see what they have prophesied established (13:6), though in actuality they have no calling from Yahweh (13:7).

Because the message of the false prophets originates in their own hearts rather than in the Lord's revelation, Ezekiel also criticizes the content—or rather, lack of content—of their messages. Their visions are false and their divinations a lie (13:6); this phrase and its variations form a constant refrain in 13:6–9. What their message consists of is revealed in verse 10: They have been prophesying "Peace," when in fact no peace is to be expected.⁵

Such false comfort has had catastrophic results. In speaking according to their own hopes rather than the word of the Lord, they have seduced God's people into a false security that will be devastatingly exposed on the coming day of judgment. This criticism of the prophets is expressed in a series of pictures. (1) They have acted "like jackals among ruins" (13:4). The Hebrew word translated "jackals" ($\sin a$) also covers smaller scavengers such as "foxes." Clearly this is not a positive image. The average jackal is not busy among the ruins with a trowel and construction helmet, rebuilding what has fallen down; rather, his presence there is a matter of self-interest, looking to pounce on any small animals hiding in cracks in the rocks. It seems from other passages in the Bible that the picture may be even more negative than that. The jackal/fox may be thought of as an agent of destruction, as in Nehemiah 4:3: "What they are building—if even a fox ($\sin a$) climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!"

(2) Intent on pursuing their own prey, these skulking scavengers have failed to take on the dangerous, but necessary, task of standing in the gaps to build up a solid protection for Israel on the Day of the Lord (Ezek. 13:5). In this verse, the picture is changed to that of a besieged city. In ancient warfare, the attackers would build up a siege ramp, frequently to a corner of the city, in order to breach the walls higher up where they were thinner. Meanwhile the defenders would build a counter-ramp on the inside to enable the easy supply of materials to repair any breaches that were made.⁸

Only the bravest would be found at the breaks in the wall, for there the fighting would be at its fiercest. The false prophets, however, are more interested in their own personal security than the safety of the city.

(3) The third picture Ezekiel uses to describe the "prophets of Israel" also involves a wall. In 13:10–16 the image is of a poorly constructed wall, which the prophets rather than rebuilding properly merely cover with "whitewash," thus giving it a misleadingly solid appearance. Its true nature will be exposed, however, by the coming of the storm. When the rain comes down in floods, with hailstones and violent winds, the wall will collapse to the destruction of all concerned in the venture (13:12–15).

The concern of the passage is not so much the fate of those who trust in the whitewashed wall, but that of those who have whitewashed it, that is, the false prophets. The divine hand will be raised in judgment on them," and it is decreed that "they will not belong to the council of my people or be listed in the records of the house of Israel, nor will they enter the land of Israel" (Ezek. 13:9). (1) To be excluded from "the council of my people" (sôd 'ammî) was to be cut off from their place in the assembly of the righteous, the true Israel. It is surely a fitting fate that those who have falsely claimed to be prophets, and thus to have access to the council of the Lord (sôd yhwh), will ultimately be excluded even from the council of his people.

- (2) Further, their names will not "be listed in the records of the house of Israel" (13:9). To be left off the records of the people means being excluded from full participation in the community. The importance of such a list may be seen from Nehemiah 7, where the finding of a register listing those who first returned from exile became the basis on which certain families were excluded from the priesthood (Neh. 7:63–64 = Ezra 2:62–63).
- (3) They will not "enter the land of Israel" (13:9). When Israel returns from exile, the false prophets will not participate in that return. Like rebellious Israel in the desert, they will not [re-]enter the Promised Land.

Address to the False Prophetesses of Israel (13:17–23)

THE CHARGE AGAINST the women who prophesy in the second part of Ezekiel 13 is both similar to and different from that against the prophets of Israel. In common with Ezekiel's criticism of the prophets of Israel, the source of the women's prophecy is identified as "out of their own

imagination" (13:17). However, whereas the prophets of Israel were apparently prophesying in forms indistinguishable from those used by Ezekiel, the practices adopted by the women seem to have had magical overtones. Exactly what those practices are has been a matter for some debate because of the obscure terminology employed. It seems that the women were involved in tying magic bands of some kind ($k^e s \bar{a} t \hat{o} t$, 13:18), though whether the object being tied up was the medium herself, the inquirer, or an image of the victim is not clear.

Further, the prophetesses are charged with making *mispāḥôt* for their heads (13:18). *mispāḥôt* occurs only here and in 13:21, and the common translation "veils" is at best a tentative suggestion on the basis of the context; they may equally well have been amulets worn around the neck. How those veils or amulets functioned is also a matter of conjecture. Whatever the precise form of their actions, however, they are not those of a true prophet (or prophetess) of the Lord.

The prophesying women are apparently concerned more with the future of individuals than the fate of the nation. They mediate life and death to "the righteous" and "the wicked" (13:22). There is certainly nothing wrong in such concerns; such themes are part of Ezekiel's own calling to prophetic ministry (see 3:17–21; 33:1–9). The women are not criticized for dealing with the wrong questions but for giving the wrong answers. They "disheartened the righteous with [their] lies, when I had brought them no grief, and . . . encouraged the wicked not to turn from their evil ways and so save their lives" (13:22). In other words, their magically derived oracles are upsetting the moral and spiritual order, afflicting those who ought not to have been afflicted and comforting those who ought not to have been comforted.

In doing this, the prophesying women are motivated not by divine calling but by pursuit of personal profit in the form of small payments of barley and bread. The result of their activities is deadly, killing "those who should not have died" and sparing "those who should not live" (13:19). They are, in a graphic image, "ensnar[ing] people like birds" (13:20), that is, regarding both their clients and their communities as disposable objects, to be exploited in whatever ways proved profitable. These statements should be read against the background of Ezekiel's own call to be a watchman, warning the wicked to turn from their ways and encouraging the righteous

to remain steadfast (3:17–21; 33:1–9). Fulfillment of this role is a means of turning the wicked from death to life and releases the prophet from responsibility for them. The women's destructive work in this area, however, prevents the wicked from becoming aware of their true state, putting both their lives and the women's own lives in jeopardy (13:18).

As with the condemnation of the prophets of Israel, there is a focus on the negative results of the activities of the prophesying women. They have lied to the people, who in turn have listened to their lies (13:19). Out of concern for the people of Israel, referred to as "my people" five times in this chapter (Ezek. 13:9, 10, 19, 21, 23), the Lord will act to break the power of the prophesying women over the people, destroying their equipment so that the people will no longer be their victims (13:20–21).

The closing verses of the chapter (13:22–23), while still grammatically addressed to the women, pick up themes from the first section to round off the whole. The "prophets of Israel" and the "[women] who prophesy" both oppose in different ways the ministry to which God has called Ezekiel. The "prophets of Israel" are a stumbling block to the reception of Ezekiel's message of national judgment by the people, while the "[women] who prophesy" undermine his calling to proclaim life to the righteous and to warn the wicked to turn from their ways. To be opposed to the prophet God has sent is to be a false prophet (ess), ensnaring the people rather than setting them free, causing distress to the righteous and false confidence to the wicked.

In this way, both righteous and wicked are trapped as they come to believe inaccurate and false ideas about God's plan for his people. Ezekiel asserts that the future fate of his opponents will show him to have been the true prophet of the Lord. When the Lord acts to destroy the works of his opponents, then the people "will know that I am the LORD" (Ezek. 13:14, 21, 23) and (by implication) that Ezekiel has acted as his true prophet. The coming of the truth will indeed set them free. Then the unbelievers and delayers will be answered in full.

Bridging Contexts

SPEAKING GOD'S WORD TODAY. It may seem as if the world of ancient prophets and prophetesses is very different from ours, until we consider

what a wide variety of sources people around us turn to in order to determine the future. We too live in a world where many people claim to speak for God, both inside and outside the church.¹⁷ We too live in a world where people readily turn to superstition for guidance, consulting their daily horoscope in the newspaper or calling "dial a psychic." Though we may not have an officially sponsored "magical" worldview, as the Babylonians did, popular attitudes are often much closer to the old paganism than we might expect.¹⁸ These false ideas trap people by making it harder for them to hear God's Word.

What has changed for us, however, is the form in which God's revelation comes. For Ezekiel, God's word came to him directly. To be sure, in some instances he had God's earlier self-revelation to judge it by. Thus his prophecies are strongly influenced by references to the events of biblical history and in places he adapts the words of other prophets, notably Jeremiah and Zephaniah (e.g., cf. Ezek. 22:25–28 with Zeph. 3:3–4). His prophecies did not come to him in a vacuum, but what marked him out from his opponents was that he spoke as one directly and inerrantly inspired by God. He had stood in God's council, heard his words, and received his commission; therefore he spoke. When Ezekiel said "This is what the Sovereign LORD says. . . ," he spoke the truth.

The false prophets, by contrast, spoke out of their own imagination. They pretended to such inspiration, even adopting similar formulas ("The LORD declares. . . ," Ezek. 13:6–7), yet there was no reality of revelation to back up their words. The visions they claimed to have seen were empty lies, not the real thing.

Our situation is different from Ezekiel's. We who speak God's word today do so "second-hand," as it were. We do not speak as those who have received a direct, personal message from God, but as those who have the full and completely inspired Word of God, the Scriptures. Our task is to take that word and apply it to our contemporary situation. The contrast in our day between "true prophet" and "false prophet" is not so much as to who has really received the word of God, but rather who is rightly handling the Word of God.

At first sight, it might seem to be a disadvantage to be living in a time of mediate rather than immediate revelation. It might seem attractive to be able to declare to our congregations as the prophets did, "This is what the LORD says . . . ," and then proceed with God's direct revelation for today. Yet the difficulties experienced by God's people in discerning between true and false prophets and between true and false prophecies, then and now, point us in the other direction. Actually, we are the advantaged ones, for our congregations can test our words against an infallible measuring rod, the completed Scriptures.

However, even though the Scriptures are infallible, our exegesis of them is not. Not everything in the Bible is equally clear, nor is it always clear which particular text is appropriate to a particular situation, or which texts provide the context in the light of which other texts should be read. These facts should lead us to cautious humility when it comes to identifying our opponents as "false prophets." Other believers may, while seeking to apply Scripture to the same situation as ourselves, come to different conclusions from us. The issue between us in this case is not whether there is a revelation from God or whether Scripture applies to a particular situation, but what that revelation requires us to do. With such people, we should be willing to enter patient dialogue, seeking to grow in our mutual understanding of how the Word applies to this particular problem.

Misreading God's Word. But we also encounter in our situation those who disbelieve in the reality of any revelation at all, just as Ezekiel did. Here our concern is not so much with those holding other religious convictions or no religious convictions, but with those who while claiming to be Christians actually undermine the Bible as the basis for theology. This may take the form of a soothing semiorthodoxy, proclaiming a partial message that sounds like the truth, but is actually a distortion. Such preachers may mention only the positive aspect of salvation, while ignoring the uncomfortable realities of God's wrath on sin and the judgment to come.

Or it may take the form of a more radical revisioning of Christianity in the likeness of pagan religions, addressing God as "Divine Father/Mother" or "Sophia." The basis of these first two positions is ultimately a denial of the reality of the Bible as the ultimate revelation of God and the sole standard for faith and practice.

In addition, we have those who, while recognizing the Bible as a revelation from God, blunt its message by applying it to a time other than our own. This may take the form of an eschatologically overworked imagination, which pushes the significance of the Bible into the future. On

this approach, the Bible is seen as a source book for end-times prophecies rather than a message that speaks to us in our everyday life.

However, perhaps more common in our situation is a more subtle form of this problem, which pushes the significance of the Bible back into the past. For such people, the historical and cultural rootedness of the Scriptures provides a reason for abandoning its teaching in our present historical and cultural context. For instance, instead of considering how Paul's teaching on the role of women both challenges and affirms aspects of our own culture, it is held that while Paul may have had something true (and even inspired) to say to the people of his day, before it can say anything to us, his teaching must be brought up to date and into line with the times in which we live.

Even such a well-respected evangelical scholar as F. F. Bruce could fall into this error. In discussing Paul's view of the role of women in the ministry of the church, he concluded: "Whatever in Paul's teaching promotes true freedom is of universal and permanent validity; whatever seems to impose restrictions on true freedom has regard to local and temporary conditions." For Bruce, this extrabiblical criterion—"true freedom"—became the means by which Scripture's less palatable teachings were ruled of no relevance for the present day. Now this is not to suggest that there are not difficult questions to answer about how particular Scriptures should be applied in changed cultural conditions; however, in principle the answer to that difficulty is fundamentally to allow Scripture to interpret Scripture, rather than to submit it to modern consciousness for arbitration.²¹

Such teachings are no less destructive in our era than they were in days of old. The result of both kinds of teaching is that people are confused about what the Bible says and how, if at all, it relates to us. The word of warning to the false prophets and prophetesses is still valid. There is no place among God's people for those who seek to lead them astray. Yet the comfort for God's people remains. When the Lord ultimately acts, it will be seen definitively who has rightly handled his Word.

Contemporary Significance

RESPONDING TO THE present Babel. "If the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?" (1 Cor. 14:8). So Paul describes the babble of conflicting voices heard in the Corinthian church. There was no clear message—no "revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction" (14:6)—and the result was an unedifying confusion. A similar confusion reigns in the church of our day. There have never been more different denominations and factions within denominations, each proclaiming a different message to the world. No wonder the world is confused as to what the essential message of Christianity is!

How should we who make up the church respond to the present Babel? On the one hand, it is more essential than ever that those within the church who affirm the Scriptures as the divinely inspired Word of God, the sole rule of faith and practice, should work together to seek to resolve old problems and bury irrelevant distinctions. Past history should not keep us apart where the Scriptures do not. The force of Jesus' high priestly prayer for the full unity of those who will believe in him should be fully felt (John 17:23), not least because the result of that unity will be the world knowing that the Father has commissioned and sent the Son. It is a travesty when racial, social, and historical differences divide the church of Christ.

On the other hand, however, we should recognize that the current cacophony is not simply the result of a disagreement among family members. Satan's strategy is to imitate God's means of self-revelation in order to confuse the message. Wherever there are prophets, there are also false prophets. Wherever there are those preaching the truth, there are also those propagating lies. Remember the words of Jesus in Matthew 7:22–23: "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!' "It is not enough to be sincere; it is not enough to make great claims about yourself; what counts is knowing God and faithfully declaring his Word.

We are therefore not automatically to believe those who claim to be speaking the Word of God to us. As John instructs us, we are to test every spirit (1 John 4:1). If someone is of God, then he or she will confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (4:2). The need to test those who claim to bring God's message to us did not come to an end in Ezekiel's day; it was

true in New Testament times and it is true today. We are to apply the test that the Bereans are commended for: They "examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11). We are not to be taken in by lofty claims, but rather to test all things by the standard of the Word of God. In some instances, that may mean separating from those who claim to be Christians but fail the test. We should not allow historical accidents to hold us together with those from whom the Scripture insists that we part.

Motivation behind failure to prophesy correctly. What was it, though, that motivated the false prophets? Why would people claim to speak for God when they had received no such commissioning? Why would someone prophesy a peace for which he had no evidence? It's really very simple, isn't it? People want to hear good news. When the terminally ill patient comes to his physician and says, "Tell me the truth, Doctor, is it serious? Am I going to die?" which is easier: to tell the uncomfortable truth or gloss it over with optimistic words? It is much easier to tell people happy news than sad news—especially if that sad news involves a judgment on their lifestyle. The bottom line for the false prophets was comfort for themselves, self-interest rather than telling the people what they really needed to hear. It is so much easier to build on sand than to dig down to the solid rock. But when the flood comes, the difference in foundation is immediately apparent (Matt. 7:24–27).

In truth, all of us who preach or talk to others about Christianity are familiar with the temptation to be a false prophet from time to time. Sometimes the temptation is to be a jackal. As a jackal, the ruins of other people's lives are of no account to you so long as you have the things you need. You have little concern for those around you going to a lost eternity in hell; your own interests are more important.

At other times, perhaps the temptation is to be a draft-dodger, happy to let others stand in the gap rather than you. Your security and safety are what are really important to you. So you do not witness to those at work or at school because they might laugh at you or think you are weird. Not for you a place on the front lines of evangelism. You'd rather watch from the sidelines.

At still other times, the temptation comes to be a whitewasher. You never confront anyone about their sinful lifestyle. Instead, by your silence, you whitewash their wall. Should I witness to that family member who is a

Mormon? Why, he lives such a good moral life! Splish, Splash! On goes another coat of whitewash. Should I inquire whether my family members are really trusting in Jesus for their salvation? But they all go to church, don't they? Splish! Splash! The appearance is all that counts. If the truth be told, there is a little bit of each of these categories of false prophet within each of us.

Jesus Christ, the true prophet. We should not leave this passage, however, without considering how Christ has fulfilled the role of true prophet. The man who stood in the gap in the city wall on the day of battle was risking his own life for the good of others. Jesus not only risked his life but gave his own life freely, pouring out his blood on the cross for you and me. Jesus did not let his own security stand in the way of doing God's work, nor did he guard his own comfort. Instead, for the sake of his people, he "made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Phil. 2:7–8).

Nor was Jesus ever willing to whitewash over people's sins, as a cursory glance at the Gospels will show. He had a better way of dealing with human sins than to cover them with whitewash; he covered them with his atoning blood. As a result, Christ's people are those who have "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev. 7:14). He is himself both the foundation on which they build and the One who is able to make what they have built stand forever. The wise person is indeed the one who is built on such a rock, which is alone able to withstand the storm of the Final Judgment.

Ezekiel 14:1–11

Some of the elders of Israel came to me and sat down in front of me. ²Then the word of the LORD came to me: ³"Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces. Should I let them inquire of me at all? ⁴Therefore speak to them and tell them, ⁵This is what the Sovereign LORD says: When any Israelite sets up idols in his heart and puts a wicked stumbling block before his face and then goes to a prophet, I the LORD will answer him myself in keeping with his great idolatry. ⁵I will do this to recapture the hearts of the people of Israel, who have all deserted me for their idols.⁷

⁶"Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Repent! Turn from your idols and renounce all your detestable practices!

7" 'When any Israelite or any alien living in Israel separates himself from me and sets up idols in his heart and puts a wicked stumbling block before his face and then goes to a prophet to inquire of me, I the LORD will answer him myself. ⁸I will set my face against that man and make him an example and a byword. I will cut him off from my people. Then you will know that I am the LORD.

9" 'And if the prophet is enticed to utter a prophecy, I the LORD have enticed that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand against him and destroy him from among my people Israel. ¹⁰They will bear their guilt—the prophet will be as guilty as the one who consults him. ¹¹Then the people of Israel will no longer stray from me, nor will they defile themselves anymore with all their sins. They

will be my people, and I will be their God, declares the Sovereign LORD.'"

Original Meaning

EVEN IN EXILE, the people were not left without leadership. The vacuum left by the absence of the old structures, built around the monarchy, was filled by "the elders," the heads of the exiled families. Though they had presumably come to the prophet seeking an encouraging oracle from the Lord, Ezekiel turns on these elders with a sharp accusation of idolatry (see also chs. 8 and 20). The charge against them is given in 14:3: "These men have set up idols in their hearts and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces." The accusation of having set up their "idols in their hearts" is reminiscent of 8:10–12, where the elders are denounced for secret idolatry with "all the idols of the house of Israel."

In other words, the elders in exile are tainted with the same fundamental sin as those left behind in Judah: internal idolatry. Even while externally willing to go through the orthodox motions of inquiring of the Lord, their hearts belonged elsewhere. The phrase "wicked stumbling block," which occurs six times in Ezekiel, is also invariably linked to idolatry.² Because the hearts of the exilic elders are divided between the Lord and idols, the Lord will give the elders no answer to their inquiry except an answer of judgment (14:4). By this means, the Lord will "seize" their hearts, arresting them for their sin (14:5).³ Seeking to serve two masters will result in judgment by the Lord, the only "master" with any real power to act.

The people in exile are equally implicated in this halfheartedness. They may not have given in to the flagrant idolatry going on in Jerusalem, but there was a more subtle form of assault that had affected even those in exile with the prophet in Babylon. They found themselves living in a broken and fallen world, where their regular experience was of dislocation and disorientation, where things were falling apart, where the center could not hold, and where life did not seem to make sense. The temptation they faced was to turn to the idols of this world as a means of, if not making sense out of the world, at least of numbing the pain.

Those who feel abandoned by God find that the pull of seeking out other gods increases, other gods whom they think can deliver the sense of

security and significance they seek. If the Lord cannot deliver, why not try Marduk or one of the other Babylonian gods? Their hearts are torn between two loyalties, and they are attracted by the blessings that the idols seem to promise, the greener grass they offer, the more powerful magic they seem to contain.

The result is that all of the exiles have, in their hearts, deserted the Lord for their idols (14:5). Such people—whether native-born Israelite or proselyte (14:7)⁴—should not expect to receive a word of divine guidance through the prophet. God is not deceived by the orthodoxy of their outward behavior, for he looks on the heart (1 Sam. 16:7). Instead, the Lord will answer them himself (Ezek. 14:7), by direct action rather than through a prophet. Do they want a word from the Lord? The Lord will demonstrate his attitude toward them by making them "an example and a byword" (14:8). Just as Lot's wife has become a proverbial example of the dangers of looking back, so they too will become a "byword," a proverbial warning of the dangers of divided loyalties.

The judgment with which they are threatened is being "cut . . . off from [the LORD's] people" (14:8). This punishment has often been interpreted as a form of excommunication;⁵ however, in view of the divine destruction threatened on a prophet in the following verse, the death penalty is more likely indicated here.⁶ In any case, it is doubtful that the people would have seen a big distinction between the two fates as we do. In either case, the sinner would be excised from the covenant community, from the realm of life, and sent out into the realm of death, like the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement.⁷

A similar judgment would apply to any prophet who attempted to provide an oracle for them. There were clearly other prophets present in exile apart from Ezekiel, and the temptation to go shopping around for a more favorable word was significant. Yet any such word would be no true word from the Lord, but rather a deceiving word sent as a judgment on the compromising prophet and people alike (14:9). Those who sought false gods rather than the true God would find what they sought—lies in place of the truth. Those who attempted to counteract God's will by speaking when he had not spoken would find that they were doing nothing other than God's will, confirming the guilty ones in their guilt.

Yet the fact that they are unwittingly doing the sovereign will of God in no way exempts the prophet, as secondary cause, from responsibility for his own words. In Deuteronomy 13:1–5 both elements are brought together: the will of the Lord to test the people (v. 3), and the will of the prophet to lead the people astray from the way of Yahweh (v. 5). If the people refuse to listen to God's prophets who tell them the truth, the Lord will bring judgment on the people by giving them lying prophets, who will tell them what they want to hear.

A similar judgment fell on Ahab in 1 Kings 22: As a judgment for his refusal to listen to prophetic truth, the Lord promised to send him a deceitful oracle through another prophet. Yet the prophet remains responsible for his own actions. Prophet and idolater alike will each "bear their guilt" (Ezek. 14:10), that is, they will bear the punishment their iniquity deserves. The guilt of each is equal (14:10), and so they are destined for a similar fate, that of being "cut off" or "destroyed" from the covenant people.

Yet the goal of God's judgment on the exiles is not their total extermination, but rather their salvation. There is still room for God's people to repent and return to God (14:6). The result of God's purifying judgment will be a faithful and undefiled people, cleansed from their transgressions (14:11). The goal of the covenant—God's dwelling in the midst of his people—will certainly not be thwarted, not even by Israel's sin (14:11).

Bridging Contexts

DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY and human responsibility. The question of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility is by no means a new issue. Yet perhaps few eras have been less conducive to the acceptance of divine sovereignty than ours. We live in an age that celebrates human freedom above all things. As my wife once heard it put in a women's Bible study: "The debate between divine sovereignty and human free will is too complex to discuss. But of this one thing we can be sure: Human beings have free will." Previous generations (and indeed many contemporary non-Western cultures) would certainly not have framed their conclusions in similar terms. If there was one thing that was clear to them,

it was that the gods did what they wished and human beings were powerless against them. In consequence, what modern Westerners may perceive as the key interpretive issue in this passage (How can God deceive a prophet and still hold him responsible for his actions?) would probably not have been a difficulty for Ezekiel's audience.

The Old Testament frequently traces actions that we attribute to secondary causes back to their primary cause in the will of God. Thus, whereas we perceive the abundance or lack of rain to be due to a certain combination of meteorological conditions, some of which we now recognize as due to our own mismanagement of the planet, the ancient Israelite saw the rains as a direct expression of the Lord's pleasure or displeasure with his people (Deut. 11:13–14).

In part, this is due to our different position in the redemptive-historical scheme of things. God no longer deals with our nations directly, in the way he did with ancient Israel, for our nations are not in covenant relationship with him as Israel was. So for us, rain is not directly an expression of the blessings and curses of the covenant. But in part, this attitude is also an expression of a modern form of idolatry, whereby nature is crowned with godlike powers and humanity is perceived as the only significant player in the universe.

In contrast, in the Bible it is God who is the only significant player in the universe. All things can ultimately be traced back to his agency and his will. Even the prophecy of a false prophet, which led people astray, could not be given without the Lord's permission and direction. Does that thereby make God responsible for sin? By no means. For God's action in giving the prophet a deceitful oracle is nothing other than giving him and his hearers what they have sought. It is a judgment of God that in no way violates the free will of prophet or people, for they do nothing other than what their nature inclines towards. The vaunted "free will" of sinful humanity turns out to be nothing more than the "free will" of a hungry lion presented with the choice between a juicy piece of meat and a fresh green salad. It is the lion's nature always (freely!) to choose the meat. Should the zookeeper sovereignly choose to present the lion only with fresh meat and to hold back the salad, the lion's "free will" is not thereby violated. He continues to choose what his nature dictates he will choose.

Our natural human inclination and God's grace. Left to themselves, human beings have a similar "taste" for evil. By nature, they will inevitably choose lies in place of the truth and worship the created in place of the Creator (Rom. 1:18–25). Therefore, God is in no way violating their free will when he gives them over to the sinful desires of their hearts and a depraved mind (1:24, 26, 28), or when he sends a powerful delusion on those who have refused to love the truth (2 Thess. 2:11–12). Those New Testament references demonstrate that this is not merely an "Old Testament" doctrine, but one that persists throughout the pages of Scripture.

Indeed, the truly difficult question to answer is not why God sovereignly allows sinners to persist in the delusion they seek, but why God sovereignly chooses to save some of those selfsame sinners! It is not because those saved are more intelligent or richer or more beautiful or more righteous than those who perish. Far from it, all is of grace, not of works, so that no one has any grounds for boasting (Eph. 2:8–10). The sovereignty that changes the lion's nature, enabling him to lie down in peace and eat salad with the lamb, is genuinely astonishing and without cause except for God's electing love! How indeed can it be that sinful men and women can acquire a taste for righteousness? *There* is the true cause for wonder. As Charles Wesley put it in his great hymn:

And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Savior's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! how can it be
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

Contemporary Significance

THE STANDARD OF "just good enough." When I used to work in the oil industry, we had a problem that we called the problem of "just good enough." Things would always be manufactured *just* good enough to meet the standard you set—and no better. If you simply specified a car, what you got was the most basic vehicle on four wheels, not a Mercedes. If you wanted a Mercedes, you had to ask for a Mercedes. Similarly, most people,

most of the time, are content to coast through life, doing just enough. We don't in general have a massive urge to push back the frontiers of knowledge and goodness. Most of us are content to live lives that are "just good enough."

But what is "just good enough" when it comes to your commitment to God? Is it enough to be 25 percent committed—you come to church one Sunday out of four and obey two and a half of the Ten Commandments? Is it enough to be 51 percent committed—better than the average pew sitter? Or must you be 100 percent, totally, life-dominatingly committed to God? If this was a multiple-choice test, I'm sure we'd all get the right answer. Everyone within the church knows that you ought to be 100 percent committed to God. So why is it that surveys time and time again show that the majority of Christians behave little differently from their secular counterparts? Why is it that the statistics on premarital sex and divorce are not radically different for Christians and non-Christians?

The answer is that all of us who claim the name of Christ have divided hearts. Outwardly, our appearance may "fit": We go to church regularly and appear to be decent, religious people. Yet when it comes to the tough decisions in life, there are other standards operating than God's Word, which demonstrates the existence in our hearts of other gods than the true God. We have deep-seated idolatries in our hearts that drive our various behavior patterns. Like the Laodiceans, our deeds prove us to be neither cold nor hot, but lukewarm, fit only to be spit out (Rev. 3:16).

The fundamental issue of idolatry. Yet when trouble comes, we want the Lord to come to our aid. We seek his help, but at the same time we don't want to give up on our other options. We don't want to give up our cherished sins. Ezekiel tells us that such an approach to God is not an option. You cannot serve the true God and keep one foot in the camp of idolatry at the same time. God sees what we are really like on the inside; we cannot hide the truth from him, and the double-minded person stands to receive nothing from God (James 1:7).

Much of the counseling within the church of our day fails to recognize the key significance of the idolatries that remain within our hearts. On the one hand, there is a moralizing approach that focuses purely on the level of behavior. This approach says, "Your problem is that your anger (or lust, or worry, or whatever) is sin. Repent and change your behavior! If you would just do what is right, then good feelings will follow." The problem with this approach is that in focusing on behavior it doesn't go deep enough. It doesn't recognize the reason for the behavior: the idols and false beliefs that are driving it. The reason why this particular person sins in this particular way is because there are idols and false beliefs in his or her life that say, "By doing this, you will gain what is really important and meaningful in life."

On the other hand, there is a psychologizing approach to counseling that says, "Your basic problem is that you don't see that God loves you and accepts you just as you are. If you could just feel good about yourself, right actions will follow." This approach focuses on the feelings rather than the behavior, but still doesn't go deep enough. It doesn't recognize that behind the bad feelings lies an idolatry, a belief that "even if God loves me, yet while I don't have this, I'm not a worthwhile person." Both approaches fail to see the sin behind the sin, the fundamental issue of idolatry."

A better approach is to recognize that driving both our behaviors and our feelings are deep-seated heart idolatries. Our fundamental problem lies in looking to something besides God for our happiness. This is not a new observation. The church father Tertullian put it this way:

The principle crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, the whole procuring cause of judgment, is idolatry. For, although each single fault retains its own proper feature, although it is destined to judgment under its own proper name also, yet it is marked off under the *general* account of idolatry. . . . Thus it comes to pass, that in idolatry all crimes are detected and in all crimes idolatry. ¹²

What does Tertullian mean by that? He goes on to explain that all murder is idolatry since the motive for killing is ultimately that something is loved more than God—yet in turn all idolatry is murder for it incurs one's own death. Similarly all idolatry is also adultery because it is unfaithfulness to the truth and to God, while adultery is idolatry because it flows from the inordinate desire for a person or for a sensation, a desire stronger than our love for God and our desire to obey his law.

Idolatry, then, is simply the desire for something other than God at the center of our lives as our guiding star, the source of meaning in our life. As such, idolatry is the sin behind every sin, the life-lie that drives all of our choices and values. The object of that idolatry varies from person to person. There are probably as many different idols as there are human beings. However, the fact that we have idols is an inescapable truth. Our hearts are, in Calvin's vivid image, factories that mass-produce idols.¹³

Repentance and freedom from idolatry. The only way to deal with our idols is to come to God in the simple act of repentance. Repentance turns its back on any other source of hope or self-justification and finds its refuge in the Lord alone. It is the attitude expressed by the hymnwriter Augustus Toplady: "Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to thy cross I cling." This attitude is the ultimate idol-smasher, for every idolatry is at root an effort towards self-justification. Every idol promises us salvation, that is, self-worth, if we will just give in to what it demands. The idol "beauty" says: "I can make you a worthwhile person. Just make the sacrifices I require, and you will never lack friends"; the idol "power" says: "Put in the long hours in pursuit of your career, even though it costs you your family, and I will give you a significant life." Idols make promises to those who can meet their demands.

Christianity offers salvation, meaning, and worth only to those who recognize that they can *never* give what the law demands; their only hope lies in the fact that Christ has fulfilled it for them. "Religion" or "doing good" is a popular idolatry that says: "Be a good person, punish yourself for your sins, turn your back on them, and you will be saved." The difference between Christians and religiously minded idolaters is that Christians repent not only of their sins but also of their very best deeds, their best righteousness, in order to receive in its place the righteousness of Christ, to which they cling single-heartedly.¹⁴

Even that ability to cling single-heartedly to the Lord is itself the gift of God. The promise of Ezekiel 11:19 is that the Lord will give his people "an undivided heart," a single-minded devotion to the Lord. By nature, all of us desert God and go after idols. But our idols will not ultimately have dominion over us. In order to rescue us from ourselves and from the grasp of our idols, God sent Jesus Christ into the world for us. There is nothing halfhearted about Jesus' commitment to his people. He came down from

heaven to live among us—that alone is an astonishing commitment. But his commitment is laid out even more plainly for us to see on the cross. His body was torn apart there because of my sins. His blood was poured out as a fountain to cleanse me from my unrighteousness. There on the cross, Jesus won a complete victory for us. Through his complete obedience, the demands of the law were comprehensively met. That's why his final words on the cross were: "It is finished" (John 19:30). It is complete! His work is done.

Christ's finished work on the cross is what gives us freedom from our idols. Their power to threaten us was broken once and for all, there and then. When our idols say to us, "You are not a worthwhile person if you do not have success or beauty or wealth or children or _____" (fill in the appropriate blank with the demand of your idol), now we can simply point them to the cross. There, God demonstrated his love by declaring me worth the death of his sinless only Son; there, God declared me a valued member of his family; there, God accomplished for me the free gift of salvation. That fact, unlike the moralizing or psychologizing approaches, frees me to recognize the full depth of my sin, because I now recognize the full depth of God's love for me in Christ. I am indeed a far worse sinner than I ever thought, but in Christ I am at the same time far more loved than I ever dared hope.

The result of Jesus' wholehearted sacrifice is the salvation of his people and their restoration to the full covenant relationship with God. What Ezekiel looked forward to, the presence of God in the midst of his sinless people on the far side of judgment (Ezek. 14:11), is still that to which the church looks forward. Though even now we experience the presence of Jesus in our midst whenever two or three are gathered together (Matt. 18:20), yet we are still strangers and aliens in this world, all too familiar with sin. Remaining sin in the lives of believers serves God's glory by showing that he has not done anything without cause. It continues to remind us of our own weakness and depravity and thus to point us to the Savior. It continues to remind us of the world's depravity, and thus of our neighbors' utter need of Christ if they are ever to be saved.

But sin will not remain our constant companion forever (Ezek. 14:11). Because of the sin-bearer's death in our place, we look forward to the day when we will join perfectly in the worship on the heavenly mountain. There

we will join with the whole community of saints of all times and places, along with the heavenly hosts of angels and archangels. On that day, the dwelling of God will be with his people and he will live with them (Rev. 21:3). On that day, our idols will finally be smashed, and we will be able to worship and serve our beloved God with undivided hearts.

Ezekiel 14:12-23

THE WORD OF THE LORD came to me: ¹³"Son of man, if a country sins against me by being unfaithful and I stretch out my hand against it to cut off its food supply and send famine upon it and kill its men and their animals, ¹⁴even if these three men—Noah, Daniel and Job—were in it, they could save only themselves by their righteousness, declares the Sovereign LORD.

15"Or if I send wild beasts through that country and they leave it childless and it becomes desolate so that no one can pass through it because of the beasts, ¹⁶ as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, even if these three men were in it, they could not save their own sons or daughters. They alone would be saved, but the land would be desolate.

¹⁷"Or if I bring a sword against that country and say, 'Let the sword pass throughout the land,' and I kill its men and their animals, ¹⁸as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, even if these three men were in it, they could not save their own sons or daughters. They alone would be saved.

¹⁹"Or if I send a plague into that land and pour out my wrath upon it through bloodshed, killing its men and their animals, ²⁰as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, even if Noah, Daniel and Job were in it, they could save neither son nor daughter. They would save only themselves by their righteousness.

²¹"For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: How much worse will it be when I send against Jerusalem my four dreadful judgments—sword and famine and wild beasts and plague—to kill its men and their animals! ²²Yet there will be some survivors —sons and daughters who will be brought out of it. They will come to you, and when you see their conduct and their actions, you will be consoled regarding the disaster I have brought upon Jerusalem—every disaster I have brought upon it. ²³You will be consoled when you see their conduct and their actions, for you will know that I have done nothing in it without cause, declares the Sovereign LORD."

Original Meaning

THIS SECTION OF Ezekiel's prophecy focuses on the inevitability and justice of God's decision to destroy Jerusalem. The oracle begins by introducing a hypothetical country that is unfaithful to the Lord. The implied universality of the principle is an important element supporting the justice of God's actions: The rules are the same for any nation and have not been applied unfairly to Israel. However, behind the implied universality, the actual reference is clearly to Israel, for the phrase "by being unfaithful" (Ezek. 14:13) refers elsewhere to a breach of a covenant relationship. This may be through marital infidelity (Num. 5:12, 27), misappropriation of an object belonging by rights to the Lord, as in the case of Achan (Josh. 7:1), or other action that violates the covenant between God and his people (e.g., Lev. 26:40; Ezek. 17:20). Such a breach of the covenant inevitably brings on the offending nation (i.e., Israel) the curses attached to the covenant in Leviticus 26.

These covenant curses are itemized individually in the form of four test cases (Ezek. 14:13–14, 15–16, 17–18, 19–20). In each case, a different covenant curse is envisaged: famine, through cutting off the bread supply (Lev. 26:26); wild beasts (26:22); a sword (26:25); and finally plague (26:25). The prophet has already brought together this fearsome foursome in Ezekiel 5, underlining the nature of judgment as nothing arbitrary but simply the just application of the sanctions of a covenant to which Israel subscribed—and then repeatedly broke. Now, therefore, the curses of Leviticus 26 will descend.

What is common to all four cases is the hypothetical presence in the land of three righteous men: Noah, Daniel, and Job. Each of these men was noted for righteous behavior in the midst of a corrupt generation. Noah is described as "a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time" (Gen. 6:9), while Job was held up by God to Satan as a model of righteousness (Job 1:8). The identity of "Daniel" has provoked considerable discussion, with the majority of scholars arguing that he is not the biblical character of that name, which has a different spelling, but rather a heroic figure of antiquity, Danel. This king is known from Ugaritic sources as a just ruler who "judges the cause of the widow and adjudicates the case of the fatherless." He would fit with Noah and Job as ancient figures of international reputation.

Others have argued, however, that this ruler's unquestioned pagan origins would likely have been problematic for a radically theocentric prophet such as Ezekiel, and that the arguments advanced against the traditional identification with the biblical figure Daniel are not as strong as they may at first sight appear. He too fits the description of a righteous man in a difficult time, and he would probably have been known, at least by reputation, to Ezekiel's hearers.² However, Ezekiel's oracles against the nations (Ezek. 25–32) demonstrate that he is quite capable of utilizing mythical ideas known to his hearers to make his theological points, and in the oracle against the King of Tyre he once again alludes to "Danel" (28:3).³ The bottom line is that both passages are open to either identification. Fortunately, in neither case does the interpretation of the passage rest on the identification adopted. Whether mythical Danel or biblical Daniel was originally intended, in the passage he functions merely as a cipher for a readily recognized wise and righteous man.⁴

The point in each case is that even three such outstanding citizens would be unable to rescue their closest relatives (sons and daughters) out of the divinely decreed disaster for covenant violation (14:14, 16, 18, 20); their righteousness would suffice merely to save themselves. Here, there is reference to the principle of covenant or corporate solidarity, whereby a family unit often stands or falls together.⁵ It may well be that again the apparently universal language serves to deal with a specific situation, for many of those in exile would have left their children behind them and would naturally be concerned for their fate.⁶ The source of their hope would

be that, as Abraham noted, God would not surely destroy the righteous along with the wicked (Gen. 18:23).

That basic theological statement is not contested in the hypothetical situation of Ezekiel 14; the righteous would themselves escape the judgment. What is contested, however, is the presumption that the presence of men of sufficient righteousness would save a land under the just judgment of God. If even such men could only save themselves and not their closest relatives, then what hope was there for the families of ordinary people? A similar declaration of the hopelessness of Jerusalem's situation is found in Jeremiah 15. There the Lord declares that he would not heed the intercession of even such famous prophets as Moses and Samuel. The people's fate is decided. It is too late for any change of heart to occur, and it would be useless for Jeremiah to attempt to avert it.

The repetition of the four cases in which the sentence and the outcome are the same, while only the form of the judgment is different, underlines the inevitability of Jerusalem's destruction (14:21). Her situation is worse on two counts than that of the hypothetical land of 14:12–20. Not only does she lack such righteous men as Noah, Daniel, and Job, but in addition she is faced with not one kind of judgment but all four at once. The statement "How much worse will it be . . ." is obvious; the inevitable outcome to be expected is that none can survive."

Yet the next verse introduces a surprising twist. Indeed, unexpectedly, some will survive the catastrophe. There will be sons and daughters brought out of the ruins (14:22). Their survival, however, is not due to their own righteousness or to the righteousness of relatives imputed to them. Indeed, they are not "saved" ($n\bar{a}$, from the city but "brought out" (Hophal of $y\bar{a}$, $g\bar{a}$) from it, a term that focuses on them as prisoners of war rather than trophies of grace. The purpose of saving this remnant is not for their sake but to "console" those already in exile by allowing them to see the extent of Jerusalem's depravity. When the exiles see the impious behavior of this "unspiritual remnant," then they will know that the Lord has not acted without cause (14:23). Justice will not only be done; it will be seen to have been done. Every mouth will be stopped by a recognition of just how bad Jerusalem had become, and therefore how clearly God had no other choice but to act.

Bridging Contexts

CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY. The idea of corporate or familial responsibility is not a familiar one in contemporary culture. We are thoroughly indoctrinated into the idea of individual responsibility, whereby a person who does wrong is the only one who should receive punishment. Thus, when we read the story of Achan's sin in Joshua 7, we find it hard to understand why Achan's whole family should suffer for his sin. In our culture, we would simply have punished Achan, and though that punishment may have had consequences also for his family (in the loss of a husband and father), those consequences would be an unintentional byproduct of justice, not its goal.

In contrast, the Old Testament is full of examples of corporate responsibility. Representatives of a person's family suffer on account of the sins of the head of that family (e.g., Saul's descendants in 2 Sam. 21:1–9) or are saved on account of the righteous behavior of a family member (e.g., Lot saved out of Sodom because of Abraham's intercession in Gen. 19:29; Rahab's family in Josh. 2:12–13; 6:17).

Nor is this simply an expression of ancient cultural beliefs picked up from the surrounding cultural context, which we can dismiss as irrelevant for us. In the incident of Saul's descendants, God's judgment fell on the people because of Saul's unatoned sin (2 Sam. 21:1), while in the book of Chronicles, Judah's prosperity is inextricably and immediately bound up with the faithfulness of their king. Not only do the people act on the basis of corporate solidarity, so too does God. Indeed, this principle of corporate solidarity is expressed in the very heart of Israel's creed, the Ten Commandments. There the Lord describes himself as "a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Ex. 20:5–6).

The covenant community. This corporate solidarity is closely connected to the idea of the covenant. When Abraham enters into a covenant with God, he is not the only one to be included in the blessings; they are for his descendants as well (Gen. 17:7). But if his descendants share in the blessings of the covenant as they faithfully follow in Abraham's footsteps, so also they face the consequences that flow from disobedience to the

covenant. In the case of the Abrahamic covenant, the curse is simple exclusion from the covenant community (17:14). With the Sinai covenant, however, arrive not only more detailed blessings for obedience (Lev. 26:3–13) but also more extensive sanctions for disobedience (26:14–45). Because of God's covenant with David and his house, the king is assigned a unique place in the economy of Israel, as a channel of God's blessing or curse on his people. The consequences for those who disobey these covenants include not merely themselves but the whole covenant community.

Ultimately, the Bible tells us, the whole world is divided into two communities, under two covenant heads. One community is made up of those who are "in Adam," unregenerate humanity. The other community is made up of those who are "in Christ," God's covenant people. The fate of these two peoples is already determined by the obedience or disobedience of their respective covenant heads: All those in Adam are under sentence of death, while those who are in Christ will reign in life (Rom. 5:12–20).

The point of Ezekiel 14, however, is that this "big picture" of righteousness or sin imputed on the basis of membership of a community must not blind us to the individual demands made on covenant members. Jesus answers the claim of the Jews of his day that they were Abraham's children by saying, "If you were Abraham's children . . . you would do the things Abraham did" (John 8:39). The members of Adam's community prove themselves to be natural children of their father by sinning on their own account; equally, those who claim to be members of the Lord's covenant community must demonstrate a righteousness of their own, reflecting the perfect righteousness they have been given. As the apostle John puts it:

The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did. (1 John 2:4–6)

We cannot trade on the borrowed righteousness of others while ourselves lacking the marks of regeneration. For we too face a judgment to come on

the last day in which God's justice will be poured out in full measure. Only those truly trusting in Jesus Christ as their covenant head will escape, and there can be no assurance apart from obedience. Obedience—genuine, idolsmashing obedience—is the mark of a true work of grace in the heart.

Contemporary Significance

THE MYSTERIOUS SIDE of providence. As human beings, one of our persistent traits is the marginalization of evil. We find it hard to believe in the existence of evil inside ourselves and the ones we love; instead, we reserve that sobriquet for the perpetrators of genocide and mass murder. We are ready to recognize that Hitler may have been evil, and perhaps Charles Manson and others of his ilk, but we are reluctant to admit that all of us are tainted with the same brush. We start from the premise that we are all basically good. And if we are basically good, how can a good God permit "bad things" to happen to us?

The Bible has a radically different perspective. All of us are basically bad, as Paul makes clear in Romans 3:23: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Until we grasp the accuracy of this statement as a description not merely of the worst of people but the very best, we will never understand the nature of the world in which we live. Our hearts will be filled with resentment at the impossible demands that God makes on us and his inexplicable anger at our inevitable failures.

But when we (all too rarely) experience genuine guilt over our actions, then our eyes are finally opened to the truth about our standing in God's sight. We realize that a God who is not moved to anger by what we have done cannot be a good being. If that is so, and we are in fact much worse than we ever thought, then the astonishing aspect of the world is not the bad things that happen to good people but the good things that happen to bad people. Why should God send his rain on good and evil alike? God's patience with sinners is the really mysterious side of providence.

For that reason, the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians is not a bad thing happening to good people but a genuinely bad thing (a "dreadful," or more lit., an "evil" judgment; see Ezek. 14:21), which is deservedly happening to bad people. When the exiles learn the truth of Jerusalem's depravity by observing the survivors of the holocaust, then they will come to recognize

that God has indeed not acted without cause (14:23). A city and nation can reach a stage where the presence of a few righteous people, be they the most righteous people who ever lived, cannot save it from God's wrath (14:13–20). As it was in the days of Noah and in the time of Sodom, so now judgment without mercy will descend upon the wicked of Jerusalem.

A God of grace and patience. Yet was Jerusalem really worse in its idolatry and social sins than New York or San Francisco or any of our modern cities? Are our small towns and villages really more God-fearing than the ancient Israelites were? The astonishing fact is not that God judged Jerusalem, but that God allows our contemporary society, with all its sins, flagrant and secret, to continue to exist. We should not regard that patience as inability to act, however. God's "slowness" is patience in order to allow time for all of his chosen people to repent. But once that harvest is complete, the Day of Judgment will come with speed and finality (2 Peter 3:9–10). The sheep will be separated out from the goats, the children of the kingdom from the children of wrath, and there will be no room for quibbling at the justice of God.

All will then see that God has indeed done nothing without cause. When the true extent of the evil in our hearts is revealed, there will be no more marveling over how a good God could send anyone to eternal punishment. Instead, there will only be wonder and adoration at the astonishing grace of God that chose to rescue us from the fate we deserved all too well. We will be truly astonished that he chose from before the foundation of the world to save for himself a people of every tribe and nation and language group, through the death of his only Son on the cross. On that day, our refrain will indeed be, in Charles Wesley's words:

Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be?
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

Ezekiel 15

The word of the LORD came to me: ²"Son of man, how is the wood of a vine better than that of a branch on any of the trees in the forest? ³Is wood ever taken from it to make anything useful? Do they make pegs from it to hang things on? ⁴And after it is thrown on the fire as fuel and the fire burns both ends and chars the middle, is it then useful for anything? ⁵If it was not useful for anything when it was whole, how much less can it be made into something useful when the fire has burned it and it is charred?

6"Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: As I have given the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest as fuel for the fire, so will I treat the people living in Jerusalem. ⁷I will set my face against them. Although they have come out of the fire, the fire will yet consume them. And when I set my face against them, you will know that I am the LORD. ⁸I will make the land desolate because they have been unfaithful, declares the Sovereign LORD."

Original Meaning

IN THE EARLIER CHAPTERS, we saw how Ezekiel was called to use a variety of sign-acts to illustrate and drive home to the people's hearts the great danger facing Jerusalem. The vision of the abandonment of the temple (chs. 8–11) formed essentially the same message in another format. Chapters 15–19 comprises a series of extended metaphorical units, demonstrating Ezekiel's versatility in pounding home the message with which he has been commissioned.¹

Ezekiel 15 is a brief parable, a pictorial story with a sting in the tail; the interpretation of the parable that the prophet adds develops the message of

chapter 14 concerning the inevitability of Jerusalem's destruction. The link with the preceding section is apparent in the concluding verse (15:8), which picks up the idea of a land acting unfaithfully ($m\bar{a}'al\ ma'al$; 14:13), that is, breaching the covenant relationship, and consequently becoming desolate ($\check{s}^e m\bar{a}m\hat{a}$; 14:16).² This acts as a kind of inclusio, rounding off this section (14:12–15:8) with its focus on Jerusalem's forthcoming annihilation.³

Yet the message of chapter 15 only becomes plain when the interpretation is added to the parable. Like many parables, the meaning is at first concealed in a homely illustration, so obviously true to life that no one can disagree. Once the audience has accepted the self-evident surface message of the parable, then its less palatable deeper significance can be revealed. In a similarly roundabout way, the prophet Nathan confronts King David with his adultery (2 Sam. 12:1–10). First, he tells a story of a rich man who steals his poor neighbor's single lamb rather than kill one of his own. Only after David has recognized the self-evident truth that such behavior is reprehensible ("The man who did this deserves to die") does Nathan reveal its true application: "You are the man!" David is condemned out of his own lips. Similarly in Isaiah's "Song of the Vineyard," the prophet lays out the deplorable state of the Lord's vineyard in metaphorical form before stating explicitly that the vineyard in question is the Lord's vineyard, the house of Israel and the men of Judah (Isa. 5:1–7).

Thus, Ezekiel starts out with a familiar agricultural picture. The prunings cut from the vine were familiar objects, and it is immediately apparent to all that they serve no useful purpose. They cannot be manufactured into anything of value, not even a peg to hang something on—the most basic of all uses. They have neither strength nor beauty to commend them. The only thing therefore to do with these agricultural by-products is to burn them. Now frequently among the ashes of the fire, half-burnt pieces of vine would be found, the ends burned away and the middle charred. Were such pieces thereby made more useful? The conclusion of Ezek. 15:5 is inescapable: "If it was not useful for anything when it was whole, how much less can it be made into something useful when the fire has burned it and it is charred?" No one can disagree with Ezekiel's presentation thus far.

He then proceeds to apply the metaphor, to press home a less acceptable proposition: Jerusalem is like that vine wood, and its fate is therefore (inevitably) going to be that of half-burnt vine branches, fit for nothing but

to be thrown back onto the fire and consumed completely. Just as the Lord has "given" vine wood to be burnt because of its uselessness, so also the inhabitants of Jerusalem have been "given" by the Lord (15:6). This implies not only a comparable divinely determined fate (burning) but a comparable divinely determined assessment of value (useless).

But even this first "burning," the initial defeat of Judah in 597 B.C. and the first exile, has not achieved a redemptive purpose: The people have not been made any more fit for God's purposes, but on the contrary even more useless than before. Again, the conclusion is inescapable: "Although they have come out of the fire, the fire will yet consume them" (15:7). Back into the fire they will go, for they are fit for nothing else, and this time the destruction will be complete. As in 14:12–23, the unfaithfulness of the land to its covenant overlord in pursuing idols will result in its being made desolate.

Bridging Contexts

BECAUSE WE ARE not familiar with vines and vine branches in our everyday experience, the temptation for us is to connect this parable too quickly to the usage of that imagery in the rest of Scripture. The Bible is the only place where we are accustomed to encounter vines and branches. Yet in so doing we may miss the point of the parable, which moves from obvious everyday experience to establish unpalatable spiritual truth. Ezekiel's hearers would not immediately have recognized the vine branch as a picture of Israel, and it is important for the effectiveness of the parable that they should not do so until *after* they have accepted the surface meaning as inescapably true. Like David, they must not recognize their reflection in the mirror until they have pronounced sentence on themselves. Parables characteristically pull the rug out from underneath us, sweeping away our comfortable certainties and showing us an unexpectedly unfamiliar landscape where a moment earlier we thought we found ourselves at home.⁴

Having said that, once the application has been made, the parable invites comparison with other traditional uses of similar imagery, notably the vineyard image and that of fire. The vine is a traditional symbol for Israel, expressing God's loving care for that nation as a vinedresser takes care of what he has planted (Ps. 80:8–9; Isa. 5:1–7). The image also expresses

God's expectation of return from his people: The vinedresser looks for fruit in return for his labors, an expectation in which he has often been disappointed (Isa. 5:2; Jer. 2:21).

Ezekiel takes this metaphor one stage further by comparing the inhabitants of Jerusalem not to the vine itself, from which fruit was to be expected, but to the prunings from the vine, which were inherently useless and fit only for the fire. This fits with Ezekiel's radical emphasis on the congenital nature of Israel's sin, which comes to expression in the following chapter.⁵ There never was a golden age of obedience in the past from which Israel has now declined but only one long history of unfaithfulness, and thus judgment is inevitable.

Yet does Ezekiel's message not also invite the hearer to ask the question: "If those remaining in the land are the prunings, is there still a true vine, a real Israel, somewhere else—perhaps even among the exiles?" This fits with Ezekiel's insistence in Ezekiel 11 that God's presence is no longer in Jerusalem but among the exiles. In contrast to the insistence of those left in the land that they were the choice portion, chosen to inherit the land (11:3, 15), they are actually the part destined for burning, while the remnant exists among those in exile (11:7–12, 15–16).

The imagery of fire has a twofold history in the Old Testament, as a purifying force and as a destroying force. The idea of a refiner's fire cleansing the people from their impurities is found in 1 Kings 8:51; Isaiah 1:25; 48:10; and several times in postexilic literature (e.g., Mal. 3:2–3). Yet the fire is also an image of the power of the Lord to destroy the worthless (e.g., Ex. 15:7; Isa. 5:24). It is only natural for the imagery of fire to be applied to the trials of 586 B.C. But the real question was whether that fire had a refining goal, producing a purified people, or a destroying goal, wiping out an impure people. Ezekiel's contention, which runs contrary to the hopes of many of his fellow exiles, was that as far as Jerusalem was concerned, the fire was that of God's judgment, and its goal was not the redemption of his city (as in Isa. 1:25–26) but its total destruction.

Contemporary Significance

WHY DO BAD THINGS happen to people in this life? The destruction coming on Jerusalem is one specific example of a more general problem: If all

things in this world come from the hand of the sovereign Lord, why does he send pains and sorrows into the lives of all people, and some more than others? What purpose do these things serve in the world? The answer to that question is that, like fire, they serve a twofold purpose: to purify and to destroy.

There are two mistakes people commonly make in this regard. The first is to assume that all "bad things" have a destructive, punitive purpose. Why did I lose my job? Why did my spouse die? Why did God allow my exhusband to sexually abuse my child? If we see all of these evils as only the result of God's punitive purpose, then we develop a tragically distorted view of God. God is then seen as a kind of divine policeman, eternally hiding at the roadside to catch us exceeding the speed limit of life.

True, all the evils in this world are the result of sin—for without the Fall there would have been no death or sickness, no cause for tears or mourning. But not all the evils in my life are the direct result of my sin. To take a trivial example, God did not cause it to rain on my picnic because I missed my quiet time yesterday. Jesus addressed this view when his disciples posed the question to him concerning a man blind from birth, as to who sinned: the man himself or his parents. The Lord's response is illuminating: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned . . . but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life" (John 9:3). Jesus' point is not that the man and his parents were sinless; rather, their personal sins were not the determining factor, but God's good purpose.

That purpose may be expressed through profound, life-changing incidents, as in the healing of this man, a sign demonstrating Jesus' power. Pain may indeed be the megaphone through which God speaks in order to get our attention. Or it may be expressed in the apparently trivial disappointments we experience, which cumulatively encourage us to turn our eyes from seeking satisfaction in this fallen world onward to seek our true satisfaction in God's new creation. Without God's redemptive application of the rod of suffering to our lives, we would have no cause to desire something better than this world and thus to turn to God.

Yet not all suffering is inherently redemptive. That was the mistake the exiles had been deceived into making by their eager desire for a better future for their homeland. So also people may imagine that because a person has suffered a great deal, he or she has automatically been made a

better person by it. Some suffering may not only result from my sin, it can also confirm me in my sin. Suffering can harden a heart, preparing the person for final destruction, as well as soften it, preparing him or her for final redemption.

What is it, then, that makes suffering fruitful in the life of one person, while in another it is merely a foreshadowing of the wrath to come? This is the question Jesus addresses in his image of the vine and the branches (John 15). Picking up on the Old Testament imagery of Israel as a vine, he declares that he himself is the true vine whom God tends; in other words, he himself is the true Israel (John 15:1). To be "in [him]," that is, to be a member of his body, a living part of the church, is to be part of the true, fruit-bearing Israel (John 15:4), while to be apart from him is to be worthless, fit only to be burned in the fire (15:5–6). There is no place in God's kingdom for the "go it alone" mentality that is so popular in our culture.

Freedom from suffering is precisely *not* the result to be expected from remaining on the vine: on the contrary, fruitful branches are "pruned" just as fruitless ones are cast off (John 15:2, 6). Suffering is a part of every life, but for the Christian it is a "fruitful" part of life, bearing a harvest of righteousness (cf. Heb. 12:11). As we suffer, we are further conformed to the likeness of Christ, the Suffering Servant. As we suffer, we are detached from our passionate absorption with ourselves and this present world and taught to refocus our attention on the glories that await us in the place where suffering will be no more. Suffering teaches us that God's grace is sufficient for easily broken earthen vessels like us (2 Cor. 4:7–10). For the non-Christian, however, suffering ultimately bears no fruit; it brings about no change in one's course of life. Outside the vine, the outlook is as bleak as that which Ezekiel prophesies for Jerusalem: Unbelievers are headed on a course toward certain destruction.

Ezekiel 16

The word of the LORD came to me: ²"Son of man, confront Jerusalem with her detestable practices ³and say, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says to Jerusalem: Your ancestry and birth were in the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite. ⁴On the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to make you clean, nor were you rubbed with salt or wrapped in cloths. ⁵No one looked on you with pity or had compassion enough to do any of these things for you. Rather, you were thrown out into the open field, for on the day you were born you were despised.

6" 'Then I passed by and saw you kicking about in your blood, and as you lay there in your blood I said to you, "Live!" ⁷I made you grow like a plant of the field. You grew up and developed and became the most beautiful of jewels. Your breasts were formed and your hair grew, you who were naked and bare.

8" 'Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign LORD, and you became mine.

⁹" 'I bathed you with water and washed the blood from you and put ointments on you. ¹⁰I clothed you with an embroidered dress and put leather sandals on you. I dressed you in fine linen and covered you with costly garments. ¹¹I adorned you with jewelry: I put bracelets on your arms and a necklace around your neck, ¹²and I put a ring on your nose, earrings on your ears and a beautiful crown on your head.

¹³So you were adorned with gold and silver; your clothes were of fine linen and costly fabric and embroidered cloth. Your food was fine flour, honey and olive oil. You became very beautiful and rose to be a queen. ¹⁴And your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty, because the splendor I had given you made your beauty perfect, declares the Sovereign LORD.

15" 'But you trusted in your beauty and used your fame to become a prostitute. You lavished your favors on anyone who passed by and your beauty became his. ¹⁶You took some of your garments to make gaudy high places, where you carried on your prostitution. Such things should not happen, nor should they ever occur. ¹⁷You also took the fine jewelry I gave you, the jewelry made of my gold and silver, and you made for yourself male idols and engaged in prostitution with them. ¹⁸And you took your embroidered clothes to put on them, and you offered my oil and incense before them. ¹⁹Also the food I provided for you—the fine flour, olive oil and honey I gave you to eat—you offered as fragrant incense before them. That is what happened, declares the Sovereign LORD.

²⁰" 'And you took your sons and daughters whom you bore to me and sacrificed them as food to the idols. Was your prostitution not enough? ²¹You slaughtered my children and sacrificed them to the idols. ²²In all your detestable practices and your prostitution you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were naked and bare, kicking about in your blood.

²³" 'Woe! Woe to you, declares the Sovereign LORD. In addition to all your other wickedness, ²⁴you built a mound for yourself and made a lofty shrine in every public square. ²⁵At the head of every

street you built your lofty shrines and degraded your beauty, offering your body with increasing promiscuity to anyone who passed by. ²⁶You engaged in prostitution with the Egyptians, your lustful neighbors, and provoked me to anger with your increasing promiscuity. ²⁷So I stretched out my hand against you and reduced your territory; I gave you over to the greed of your enemies, the daughters of the Philistines, who were shocked by your lewd conduct. ²⁸You engaged in prostitution with the Assyrians too, because you were insatiable; and even after that, you still were not satisfied. ²⁹Then you increased your promiscuity to include Babylonia, a land of merchants, but even with this you were not satisfied.

³⁰" 'How weak-willed you are, declares the Sovereign LORD, when you do all these things, acting like a brazen prostitute! ³¹When you built your mounds at the head of every street and made your lofty shrines in every public square, you were unlike a prostitute, because you scorned payment.

³²" 'You adulterous wife! You prefer strangers to your own husband! ³³Every prostitute receives a fee, but you give gifts to all your lovers, bribing them to come to you from everywhere for your illicit favors. ³⁴So in your prostitution you are the opposite of others; no one runs after you for your favors. You are the very opposite, for you give payment and none is given to you.

35% 'Therefore, you prostitute, hear the word of the LORD! ³⁶This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Because you poured out your wealth and exposed your nakedness in your promiscuity with your lovers, and because of all your detestable idols, and because you gave them your children's blood, ³⁷therefore I am going to gather all your lovers, with

whom you found pleasure, those you loved as well as those you hated. I will gather them against you from all around and will strip you in front of them, and they will see all your nakedness. ³⁸I will sentence you to the punishment of women who commit adultery and who shed blood; I will bring upon you the blood vengeance of my wrath and jealous anger. ³⁹Then I will hand you over to your lovers, and they will tear down your mounds and destroy your lofty shrines. They will strip you of your clothes and take your fine jewelry and leave you naked and bare. ⁴⁰They will bring a mob against you, who will stone you and hack you to pieces with their swords. ⁴¹They will burn down your houses and inflict punishment on you in the sight of many women. I will put a stop to your prostitution, and you will no longer pay your lovers. ⁴²Then my wrath against you will subside and my jealous anger will turn away from you; I will be calm and no longer angry.

43" 'Because you did not remember the days of your youth but enraged me with all these things, I will surely bring down on your head what you have done, declares the Sovereign LORD. Did you not add lewdness to all your other detestable practices?

44" 'Everyone who quotes proverbs will quote this proverb about you: "Like mother, like daughter." ⁴⁵You are a true daughter of your mother, who despised her husband and her children; and you are a true sister of your sisters, who despised their husbands and their children. Your mother was a Hittite and your father an Amorite. ⁴⁶Your older sister was Samaria, who lived to the north of you with her daughters; and your younger sister, who lived to the south of you with her daughters, was Sodom. ⁴⁷You not only walked in their ways and copied their detestable practices, but in all your

ways you soon became more depraved than they. ⁴⁸As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, your sister Sodom and her daughters never did what you and your daughters have done.

49" 'Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. 50 They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen. 51 Samaria did not commit half the sins you did. You have done more detestable things than they, and have made your sisters seem righteous by all these things you have done. 52 Bear your disgrace, for you have furnished some justification for your sisters. Because your sins were more vile than theirs, they appear more righteous than you. So then, be ashamed and bear your disgrace, for you have made your sisters appear righteous.

53" 'However, I will restore the fortunes of Sodom and her daughters and of Samaria and her daughters, and your fortunes along with them, ⁵⁴so that you may bear your disgrace and be ashamed of all you have done in giving them comfort. ⁵⁵And your sisters, Sodom with her daughters and Samaria with her daughters, will return to what they were before; and you and your daughters will return to what you were before. ⁵⁶You would not even mention your sister Sodom in the day of your pride, ⁵⁷before your wickedness was uncovered. Even so, you are now scorned by the daughters of Edom and all her neighbors and the daughters of the Philistines—all those around you who despise you. ⁵⁸You will bear the consequences of your lewdness and your detestable practices, declares the LORD.

⁵⁹" 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will deal with you as you deserve, because you have

despised my oath by breaking the covenant. ⁶⁰Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you. ⁶¹Then you will remember your ways and be ashamed when you receive your sisters, both those who are older than you and those who are younger. I will give them to you as daughters, but not on the basis of my covenant with you. ⁶²So I will establish my covenant with you, and you will know that I am the LORD. ⁶³Then, when I make atonement for you for all you have done, you will remember and be ashamed and never again open your mouth because of your humiliation, declares the Sovereign LORD.'"

Original Meaning

IF EZEKIEL 15 presents an oblique parable, sneaking assent from its hearers before confronting them with the realization that they have just condemned themselves, Ezekiel 16 adopts an altogether different approach. It is an "inyour-face" condemnation of Jerusalem, in which the identity and nature of the central figure of the extended metaphor is never disguised and frequently dictates the inclusion of otherwise incongruous details into the story. With graphic imagination and violent force, Ezekiel strips away the popular fiction of "Jerusalem the Golden" and replaces it with the figure of "Jerusalem the Prostitute." Here we have an exposé of Jerusalem's true nature, with the prophet taking the part of prosecuting counsel in the divine courtroom.²

The story starts out by depicting Jerusalem's dubious origins. It began among the Canaanites, of an Amorite father and a Hittite mother (Ezek. 16:3). This was, of course, literally true of the city of Jerusalem. The city predated the arrival of the Israelites in the land of Canaan, and its prior population is called Amorite in Joshua 10:6. The word "Hittite" actually seems to denote two distinct groups of people in the Old Testament. In many passages it describes a local people from Palestine, the descendants of a man named "Heth" (e.g., Ex. 3:8, 17), while in other passages the

reference is to the neo-Hittite kingdoms in northern Syria that succeeded the Hittite empire proper (1 Kings 10:29; 2 Chron. 1:17). Here in Ezekiel the reference seems to be to the former group, the native Canaanite variety.³

In contrast to Israel, who in her creed traced her heritage back to "a wandering Aramean" (Deut. 26:5) whose arrival in the land of Canaan was the result of God's action in fulfillment of his promise, the city of Jerusalem's roots in the land are entirely natural and pagan.⁴ Jerusalem's prominent position is based on the accidents of history, not the acts of God; even before David captured it and made it his capital city, it was an important (pagan) city in its own right.

The child Jerusalem was born to heartless parents, however, who revealed their own depravity by abandoning the newborn infant. None of the usual obstetrical practices of cutting the navel cord, washing the child, covering her body in a mixture of salt and oil, and swaddling tightly for a lengthy period of time was carried out. Instead, alone and unloved, she was left in a field to die. The exposure of weak or unwanted children, especially girls, was an all-too-familiar spectacle in the ancient world.

Into that situation of helplessness and hopelessness, however, came God's intervention. Passing by this sorry spectacle, he spoke his life-giving word, causing her to live⁵ and thrive like a plant of the field. To adopt our idiom, she grew like a weed. The word of the Lord was all it took to turn the field from a place of death (Ezek. 16:5) to a place of life (16:7). Subsequently, she grew up, reached sexual maturity (16:7),⁶ and attained an age appropriate for marriage (16:8). Historically, this period corresponds to the pre-Israelite period of Jerusalem's history, during which time she existed and prospered (at the Lord's command!), but was not yet directly included in his purposes.

At the end of this time, she once again came to the Lord's attention, and he spread a corner of his robe over her, symbolically covering her nakedness (16:8). This was an act with quasi-legal status, affirming the choice of a bride, as in the case of Ruth and Boaz (Ruth 3:9). The Lord then gave an oath and entered into a covenant relationship with Jerusalem. In the terms of the metaphor, he married her. Again, the historical reality lies buried beneath the surface in the establishing of the Davidic covenant, which entails not simply the election of David and his descendants (2 Sam.

7) but also the election of Zion, David's city, as the city of the Great King (Ps. 48:2).

The Lord's choice of Jerusalem was not merely a legal and political convenience, however, but a true love match on his part. He did for the girl what no one else had ever done, washing off her blood, anointing her, and clothing her (Ezek. 16:8–9) in a threefold reversal of the circumstance of her birth, when she was not washed, anointed, or clothed (16:4).8 He provided her with a wardrobe fit for a queen, with embroidered dresses and shoes of fine leather (16:10). This is not merely elegant or royal clothing, however. She is clothed in materials that are elsewhere associated with the tabernacle, underlining her symbolic identity as the home of the temple.9

In addition, the Lord lavished on her an extensive supply of fine jewelry: bracelets, necklace, nose-ring, earrings, and crown (16:11–12). Virtually every part of the anatomy that could be bejeweled in the ancient Near East was attended to. Finally, she was fed with the very best: fine flour, honey, and olive oil (16:13). On account of her natural beauty (which itself was the result of the Lord's decision to allow her to live in the first place) and of the splendor with which the Lord had endowed her, her fame spread far and wide (16:14).¹⁰

But another turning point in her fortunes takes place in verse 15. Instead of remembering that it was the Lord who had endowed her with all these blessings, she trusted in her beauty and prostituted her reputation. Like the prodigal son, she wasted her substance in riotous living. The beautiful clothes were used to adorn the high places where idolatrous worship occurred and to clothe the idols housed within. The gold and silver were used to manufacture the idols themselves; the flour, oil, and honey, which had been given to her for food, were offered instead to her idols (16:16–19). Even her children, those whom she had borne to the Lord, were not safe; they were sacrificed to the idols she had made for herself (16:20–21).

Again, this history of idolatry corresponds to the general trend of Israel's behavior according to the account of the book of Kings. Even Solomon used part of his great wealth to build temples for the gods of his foreign wives (1 Kings 11:7–8), and the practice of child sacrifice is attested of Ahaz in 2 Kings 16:3 and Manasseh in 21:6, as well as more widely in the time of Jeremiah (Jer. 7:31; 19:5; 32:35)." The high places were a perennial

attraction to God's people, repeatedly seducing them away from the worship of the true God (2 Kings 17:9–10).

This depiction of Jerusalem's idolatry in terms of adultery has its roots in Hosea 2:4–14, where the northern kingdom of Israel is described as an ungrateful wife who takes the gifts of her husband and foolishly lavishes them on her lovers. Yet Ezekiel takes the same basic picture and develops it much further than Hosea had. Hosea's Israel was simply a foolishly promiscuous woman; Ezekiel's Jerusalem is a thoroughly depraved and degraded prostitute. Her behavior descends to ever deeper depths in Ezek. 16:23–34. In place of one type of location for her idolatry (the "high places," $b\bar{a}m\hat{o}t$; 16:16), there are now two (the "mound," geb, and "lofty shrine," $r\bar{a}m\hat{a}$; 16:24, 31). In place of adultery with idols, there now appear liaisons with human partners, with ever increasing promiscuity.

The language of lust becomes stronger: Jerusalem spread her legs for any who passed by (16:25), not least her "lustful neighbors," the Egyptians (16:26). God's judgment in reducing her territory was of no effect (16:27). Indeed, Jerusalem did not even act like a normal prostitute, for they at least are motivated to sin for material gain or out of financial desperation. Jerusalem, however, has been sinning at her own expense, so perverse in her lust that she pays everyone to join in her depravity (16:34).

Again, the historical background stretches the allegory almost to the breaking point. As a description of a woman, it is beyond the reaches even of the fevered imagination of the tabloid press. Yet as a picture of Judah's political strategy, it fits perfectly. Judah had a history of looking for love in all the wrong places, seeking security not in the Lord but in the arms of a foreign power. In the days of Ahaz, it was Assyria (2 Kings 16:7). In the days of Hezekiah, it was Babylon (Ezek. 20:12–19). In the days of Zedekiah, it was Egypt (Jer. 2:36; Ezek. 17:15). These alliances were frequently costly to Judah, for accepting a major power as overlord carried with it a substantial price tag. The suzerain invariably expected to receive silver and gold as tribute in exchange for protection (2 Kings 16:8). Even then, only rarely did they deliver the hoped-for help.

But far more expensive in the eyes of the Old Testament prophets was the cost in religious terms. An overlord may or may not have forcibly imposed his state religion on the vassal state, but religious effects on the vassal nation were nonetheless real.¹² Behind every act of international diplomacy

stood the gods of the nations as guarantors of compliance. For this reason, such international cooperation inevitably involved a measure of recognition of the existence and power of the gods of the nations, along with an implicit affirmation that trusting in the Lord alone was not effective. The temptation to appeal to the gods that had apparently made the other nation great was powerful.

It was therefore not a coincidence that Ahaz introduced Syrian-style innovations into the Jerusalem temple immediately after meeting with Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria, in Damascus (2 Kings 16:10–16). What may have seemed to politically oriented kings merely a good, if expensive, insurance policy, a means of covering all the bases, seemed to the biblical prophets a clear abandonment of Judah's single-minded covenant commitment to the Lord. For them, imitation was the sincerest form of blasphemy.

For Jerusalem, the natural and inevitable consequence of an adulterous lifestyle was an adulteress's death (Ezek. 16:38). The punishment is in accord with the crime. The normal practice was for adulteresses first to be exposed naked in public (16:37; cf. Nah. 3:5),¹³ followed by their stoning by the assembly (Deut. 22:22; Ezek. 16:40).¹⁴ Similarly, Jerusalem's places of idolatry would be torn down, her wealth and possessions stripped away, leaving her in the state in which she began, naked and bare (Ezek. 16:39; cf. 16:7). Only then, when full circle had been reached and the one initially chosen for life had been sentenced to death and executed, would the Lord's wrath finally be turned aside (16:42). Even then, it would be the silence not of mercy but of completion of the judicial sentence: All that she did had been returned on her head (16:43).

In the description of the death sentence to be carried out on Jerusalem, the historical realities are once again dominant. The sentence is executed by an assembly of Jerusalem's peers, including her lovers (16:37). It involves not simply stoning her but death by the sword (16:40) and the burning down of her houses (16:41). Each of these reflects the actual historical downfall of the adulterous city, rather than the normal punishment of an adulterous woman.

In Ezek. 16:44 the imagery changes from the husband-wife relationship to mother and daughter. Whereas Jerusalem had previously been considered in relationship to her adoptive "family," now her natural genetics are

brought to the fore. She has proved herself to be a chip off the old block by despising her husband and children. She is like her mother, the Hittite, who was married to an Amorite (16:45), the people whose sins had led to their expulsion from the land of Canaan at the time of Joshua (Gen. 15:16). This statement serves not only to link this section with the preceding one but also to suggest that she stands to share their fate of being cut off from the land.

In addition, Jerusalem has a family resemblance to her natural sisters, Samaria and Sodom, who are the primary focus of this section. Samaria, the former capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, is described as her older sister—"older" (Ezek. 16:46) refers to her size rather than age. She stands for the larger, northern kingdom, while Sodom, the "younger" (or "littler") sister, is physically smaller. Samaria lives to the north of Jerusalem with her "daughters," that is, in the common Semitic idiom, the surrounding villages, while Sodom is to the south (16:46). Jerusalem is surrounded by sinners and fits naturally into their company, delighting to go along with the crowd.

What Sodom lacked in size, it more than made up for in reputation. Along with its other ugly sister, Gomorrah, it had become a byword for abomination (Gen. 19:4–9; cf. Isa. 1:10)—and consequent complete destruction (Isa. 1:9). As well as the sexual sin to which it gave its name, which may lie behind the "detestable things" $(t\hat{o}\hat{e}b\hat{a})$ of Ezekiel 16:50, Sodom is here cited for being proud, overfed, and untroubled by the cares of life, while neglecting the needs of the poor and needy (16:49). She is the epitome of social sin.

Samaria's history of cultic sin was too well known to require further elaboration by Ezekiel. Ever since Jeroboam introduced his golden calves to the national shrines at Bethel and Dan and allowed a non-Levitical priesthood to preside over them (1 Kings 12:28–33), the northern kingdom had been regarded as theologically suspect. Samaria too had been judged by God for her aberrations and destroyed by the Assyrians (2 Kings 17:3–23).

Yet according to Ezekiel neither of these twin icons of sin could match Jerusalem's record. She did more detestable things than either of them, making them seem (comparatively) righteous (Ezek. 16:51). In comparison to the pot, the kettle is barely scorched! The conclusion is inescapable: If God judged Sodom because of her sin and if he judged Samaria because of her sin, how will Jerusalem escape from his wrath (cf. 2 Kings 21:13)?

However, if the similarity between Jerusalem and her sisters serves to justify further God's action in completely destroying her (Ezek. 16:58), that is not the only focus of attention here. Rather, the purpose of this comparison with her sisters in crime is designed to evoke a sense of shame on Jerusalem's part (16:52). Just as in her pride Jerusalem once scorned Sodom for her sin, so now that Jerusalem's sin has been uncovered, the surrounding nations scorn her (16:57). Now, instead of looking down her nose at Sodom and Samaria as beyond redemption, she will herself only be redeemed alongside them (16:53). Paradoxically, it is in that redemption itself that shame will be experienced as the inhabitants of Jerusalem realize how much worse they have been than the bywords of iniquity, Sodom and Samaria.

Though they have despised God's oath and broken his covenant and must therefore be judged (16:59), yet judgment is not God's last word. For though Jerusalem does not remember the days of her youth (16:22, 43), the Lord will remember the days of her youth and will therefore establish an everlasting covenant with her (16:60). In so doing, he will create in her the two qualities that are signally lacking in her at present, memory and shame (16:61). On the one hand, she will be profoundly aware of having broken the covenant, shattering it so completely that it can no longer stand as the basis of her self-identity vis-à-vis other nations (16:61). She will recognize that there is no goodness within herself to which she can appeal, no obedience that can form the basis for confidence in the presence of the Lord. In the language of Hosea, she will know herself to be "Not My People" (Hos. 1:9). She will be aware of the depths of her sin and ashamed of it.

On the other hand, she can also look back to the days of her youth, the days when, in the imagery of Ezekiel 16:4–6, she was similarly naked and bare before the Lord. If he chose her once, not on the basis of anything in herself but simply his own sovereign will, can he not do so again? If he covenanted with her once, may he not do so once again, this time forever? Were it not for the Lord's own words it would be too much to hope for. Second chances like that simply don't happen in real life. Lightning never strikes twice in the same place.

Yet that is precisely what the Lord affirms. He will remember his original covenant with her and establish it as an everlasting covenant (16:60),¹⁷ a

covenant that precisely because it includes wanton sinners is big enough to include Sodom and Samaria alongside Jerusalem. The nations will view Jerusalem as an object lesson of the wideness of God's mercy. On the day when the Lord "makes atonement" (*kipper*)¹⁸ for Jerusalem (16:63), she will remember and be ashamed; her tongue will be stilled¹⁹ and her pride humbled once and for all.

Bridging Contexts

NO DECORUM HERE. It is perhaps not surprising that this chapter is rarely preached on in our churches. In spite of the conclusion of Douglas Stuart that "those who wish to teach or preach on this chapter . . . can do so quite successfully and with decorum," many still concur with the assessment of C. H. Spurgeon: "A minister can scarcely read it in public"! While certainly discernment must be exercised—it is understandable, for instance, why this passage is not found in children's Bible storybooks—one wonders if contemporary Christians need to be as shielded from unpleasant realities as we tend to think. These same Christians are regularly bombarded with similarly shocking stories on the nightly news.

Furthermore, is it possible to teach this passage "with decorum" and not lose an essential element of its message? There are no new *facts* here about Israel's history, and if we read it simply as a historical catalog of crime like 2 Kings 17, we lose all that this passage *distinctively* contributes to the message of Scripture. The whole point is the lack of decorum in Ezekiel's manner. He will not "be polite" about Israel's history of sin; instead, he is instructed to expose it in its full ugliness in the most graphic manner possible. Only thus can he get the point across.²²

Differences in perspective because of cultural distance. But politeness is not the only thing that holds us back in our understanding of Ezekiel 16. Because of the cultural distance between then and now, we are likely to react to its message in significantly different ways from Ezekiel's original message. They too would have been shocked by his graphic depiction of Jerusalem's depravity. But other aspects of the picture would have struck them differently from the way they strike us. For instance, when we read of a passerby picking up an abandoned baby, it elicits no surprise in our minds. Our response is, "Of course he or she would rescue the baby and find

someone to take care of it. What other choice is there?" But in the ancient world there was no "of course" about it. In those days, if you adopted every abandoned baby you found, your house would soon be bursting at the seams. It was an accepted tragedy.

Nor could Ezekiel's audience immediately assume, as we do, that the mysterious stranger had favorable plans for the orphan. It was not unknown in antiquity for girl babies to be rescued for the purpose of prostitution rather than adoption. These differences mean that they would recognize more fully than we do the grace involved in the Lord's action, picking up this stray and not merely allowing her to survive or even adopting her, but marrying her, lavishing on her every good thing.

Nor are we used to a wife being completely dependent on her husband. In these days of equality between husband and wife, the image of marriage conveys something quite different to us than it did back then. Our culture thinks of a coequal partnership, in which each party owns half of everything, unless there is a prenuptial agreement to the contrary. In contemporary society, it is also a relationship that can be dissolved as easily as it is made, if a better offer comes along. Indeed, in Hollywood films, adultery is regularly portrayed not only as acceptable but also as praiseworthy if it allows for self-fulfillment. The idea of marriage as a relationship of subordination and obligation on the wife's part is alien to us.

In contrast, it is essential to Ezekiel's metaphor that the wife is not an independent agent, free to seek self-fulfillment in the arms of another, and that death is the appropriate sentence for adultery. Only if we understand those cultural norms will we feel the ingratitude of the woman, who has taken the gifts that were lavished on her by her true husband and squandered them on her many lovers. Only then will we feel the just nature of the sentence imposed on her, feelings that would have been automatic for Ezekiel's original hearers.

The danger is that because we may disagree with the cultural norms of marriage expressed in this chapter, finding them "politically incorrect" and "oppressive to women," we may also therefore dismiss the teaching of the chapter. That would be like dismissing Ezekiel 15 because modern technology has, after all, found a use for charcoal-toasted vine branches. Ezekiel's goal is not to affirm the abiding validity of the details of his picture, nor is he giving any justification to husbands abusing their wives.

Rather, he is utilizing conventional norms to illustrate a deeper reality, namely, the relationship between the Lord and his people.

For whatever we conclude concerning the institution of marriage, the relationship of the Lord and his people is not a coequal relationship, in which we "own" whatever he gives us and we are free to choose whether we will serve him or another god. To think that way is to lose sight of the magnitude of his grace and mercy in choosing us in the first place. Every good thing we have, not just in material terms but even in the ability to think rightly about him and act appropriately in obedience, is a fruit of his Spirit in our hearts (1 Cor. 4:7) and a gift from him (James 1:17). Our relationship is a gracious bond, freely entered into on his part without any merit on ours. To be faithful to him is to experience eternal life; to depart from him is reprehensible adultery and depravity, which can only lead to death.

Contemporary Significance

PRESENTING SIN'S true ugliness. If the sermons preached in our churches were movies, what rating would the distributors give them? In many churches, every sermon would rate a "G" ("General Audiences"). There is nothing in them to offend anyone, young or old, seeker or convert alike. Like the seeker-sensitive church I mentioned earlier, we are eager to present people with "a delightful, thought-provoking hour." We are concerned, as the quote from Douglas Stuart revealingly admitted, always to preach "with decorum." The presence of Ezekiel 16 in the pages of Scripture urges us, at least in some situations, to pull off the kid gloves and present sin in its full ugliness. Fire and brimstone sermons that focus alone on hell and God's wrath may be a serious misrepresentation of the true God, but so also are a continuous diet of polite, decorous sermons that only mention heaven and God's love. Sin is ugly, offensive, and depraved, and people need to hear that side of the Christian message too.

One might illustrate the point by reference to the movie *Schindler's List*. This film depicted as fully as it could the ugliness of the concentration camps in World War II Germany. It merited the "R" ("Restricted") rating, which it received, limiting it to adult audiences. Now a portrayal of the same facts may perhaps have been made that would have only necessitated

a "PG" ("Parental Guidance suggested") rating, by passing over some of the more gruesome details. But the emotional impact of such a film would not have been nearly the same, for only in the details does the full depth of the horror emerge. Only an "R" rating portrayal does justice to the evils of Auschwitz and Belsen; similarly, sometimes only an "R" rated sermon does justice to the outrage of sin.

The ugliness in the cross. How else do you explain the obscenity of the cross? An innocent man—the only truly innocent man who ever lived—is convicted in a rigged trial, abused by his guards until he can scarcely walk, yet forced to carry his own cross on a back that has been flayed raw. Nails are forced through the living flesh of his hands and feet, and he is jerked upright to hang until, too tired to lift himself one more time, he suffocates. What good God could permit such a death? What loving God could permit his own beloved Son to undergo such agony? What awful thing could be so bad that only such an atonement could pay for it?

The answer is *sin*. In the cross, we see sin revealed in its starkest, most abominable ugliness. There, if we sweep away for a second the prettification with which we sentimentalize that terrible moment, we see God's "R" rated answer to my sin. There is the "atonement" that God made (Ezek. 16:63), the ransom that he paid for his people (cf. Mark 10:45). The cost of our salvation was not silver and gold but the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:18–19). This is something that we all too easily forget. As Flannery O'Connor reminds us:

There is something in us . . . that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored. The reader of today looks for this motion, and rightly so, but what he has forgotten is the cost of it. His sense of evil is diluted or lacking altogether, and so he has forgotten the price of restoration.²³

Remembering in our lives. The realization of the price of restoration should stir in our hearts remembrance and shame (see Ezek. 16:63). We should remember what we once were—and be ashamed. Perhaps, like the Corinthians, we were ourselves once sexually immoral or idolaters or

prostitutes or homosexual offenders or thieves or greedy or drunkards or slanderers or swindlers (1 Cor. 6:9–11). Perhaps we were none of the above and proud of it, as the Jerusalemites prided themselves on not being like the Sodomites and Samaritans (Ezek. 16:56), and the Pharisee prided himself on being better than the tax collector (Luke 18:11). Perhaps we were convinced, like the rich young ruler, that we had fulfilled our obligation to our neighbors perfectly from our youth (18:21).

Whatever our own estimation of our righteousness or lack of it, the Bible tells us that all are alike in this matter. Every mouth is silenced before God, for "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). We were all, good and bad alike, by nature objects of God's wrath (Eph. 2:3). Let us never forget what we once were, for that is the true measure of the greatness of God's work in our lives. As Calvin put it: "If we desire, therefore, our sins to be blotted out before God, and to be buried in the depths of the sea . . . we must recall them often and constantly to our remembrance: for when they are kept before our eyes we then flee seriously to God for mercy, and are properly prepared by humility and fear."²⁴

The same reasoning led John Newton to instruct that his epitaph should simply read: "John Newton, Clerk; once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy."

The cross should also stir us to remember what we are now in Christ. Remembering what we once were is never to be an excuse for slipping back into our old ways. Though we were once objects of wrath, now we have been made alive with Christ, raised with him, and seated with him in the heavenly realms (Eph. 2:5–6). Those who once belonged on the Corinthian list are now "washed . . . sanctified . . . justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11). Such a change in being must inevitably result in a changed lifestyle, so that we no longer do the things we once did. Remembering in Scripture is never simply a mental exercise but one that issues in a particular course of action, based on the truth remembered.

Nor are we left with mere words to help us in our remembering. For we have been given the Lord's Supper, along with its admonition: "Do this . . . in remembrance of me" (1 Cor. 11:25). In the Lord's Supper, the gospel is

made visible before our very eyes. In the tokens of broken bread and poured-out wine, we see with our eyes and recall in our hearts the body of Christ broken and the blood of Christ poured out.

But the Lord's Supper is more than a symbol; it is a sacrament, communicating what it depicts. It is not simply the gospel in pictures; it is the gospel made sure to those who partake. Just as the ancient Israelites participated in the "fellowship offering" by eating together the body of the lamb that had been slain for them, so also we participate in Christ as we eat together the bread and drink the wine, the new covenant tokens of the body and blood of the Lamb of God (cf. 1 Cor. 10:16). The Lord's Supper is, to apply more appropriately the words of the beef commercial, "Real food for real people."

But our remembering of what we once were and, by the grace of God, what we are now must also have an evangelistic impact on our lives. If we were saved by our works, then it would be understandable for us to give up on many of those around us. There's no way that they could earn their way into heaven. But there is room for neither pride nor despair when salvation is all of grace; it can reach down to Sodom as easily as to Jerusalem. It can touch the heart of a prostitute more easily than a Pharisee. Though the city is to be judged, yet it can be restored. Even the height of wickedness, whether you call it Sodom, or Jerusalem, or some other more contemporary name, is not beyond the reach of God's grace. Why? Because of the all-sufficiency of the atonement God made in the death of Jesus Christ, the righteous for the unrighteous. The words of Fanny J. Crosby sum up the awesome magnitude of what Christ has done on the cross, and the impact that reality should have upon our hearts:

O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood!

To every believer the promise of God;

The vilest offender who truly believes,

That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! Let the earth hear His voice!

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! Let the people rejoice!

O come to the Father, through Jesus the Son:

And give Him the glory! Great things He hath done!

Ezekiel 17

THE WORD OF THE LORD came to me: ²"Son of man, set forth an allegory and tell the house of Israel a parable. ³Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: A great eagle with powerful wings, long feathers and full plumage of varied colors came to Lebanon. Taking hold of the top of a cedar, ⁴he broke off its topmost shoot and carried it away to a land of merchants, where he planted it in a city of traders.

5" 'He took some of the seed of your land and put it in fertile soil. He planted it like a willow by abundant water, ⁶ and it sprouted and became a low, spreading vine. Its branches turned toward him, but its roots remained under it. So it became a vine and produced branches and put out leafy boughs.

7" 'But there was another great eagle with powerful wings and full plumage. The vine now sent out its roots toward him from the plot where it was planted and stretched out its branches to him for water. 8It had been planted in good soil by abundant water so that it would produce branches, bear fruit and become a splendid vine.'

⁹"Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Will it thrive? Will it not be uprooted and stripped of its fruit so that it withers? All its new growth will wither. It will not take a strong arm or many people to pull it up by the roots. ¹⁰Even if it is transplanted, will it thrive? Will it not wither completely when the east wind strikes it—wither away in the plot where it grew?'"

¹¹Then the word of the LORD came to me: ¹²"Say to this rebellious house, 'Do you not know what these things mean?' Say to them: 'The king of

Babylon went to Jerusalem and carried off her king and her nobles, bringing them back with him to Babylon. ¹³Then he took a member of the royal family and made a treaty with him, putting him under oath. He also carried away the leading men of the land, ¹⁴so that the kingdom would be brought low, unable to rise again, surviving only by keeping his treaty. ¹⁵But the king rebelled against him by sending his envoys to Egypt to get horses and a large army. Will he succeed? Will he who does such things escape? Will he break the treaty and yet escape?

16" 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, he shall die in Babylon, in the land of the king who put him on the throne, whose oath he despised and whose treaty he broke. ¹⁷Pharaoh with his mighty army and great horde will be of no help to him in war, when ramps are built and siege works erected to destroy many lives. ¹⁸He despised the oath by breaking the covenant. Because he had given his hand in pledge and yet did all these things, he shall not escape.

19" 'Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: As surely as I live, I will bring down on his head my oath that he despised and my covenant that he broke. ²⁰I will spread my net for him, and he will be caught in my snare. I will bring him to Babylon and execute judgment upon him there because he was unfaithful to me. ²¹All his fleeing troops will fall by the sword, and the survivors will be scattered to the winds. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken.

²²" 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. ²³On the mountain heights of Israel I will

plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches. ²⁴All the trees of the field will know that I the LORD bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.

" 'I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it.' "

Original Meaning

EZEKIEL HAS ALREADY used a variety of forms of metaphorical language, both subtle and not-so-subtle, with powerful effect. In this chapter, he continues to utilize metaphorical language, this time in a form that combines "riddle" (NIV, "allegory") and "parable" (17:2). A "riddle" (hidâ) is a statement that hides the truth it imparts, while a "parable" (māšāl) elucidates the truth that underlies it by putting it in a fresh light. In other words, this chapter functions both to conceal and reveal. It has a surface meaning that is fairly simple to comprehend, even if its message is not necessarily welcome, but to the discerning reader it also has a deeper, underlying significance. Perhaps this section best fits into the genre of "fable," a story that communicates its concealed message by transposing the realities it describes into the world of plants and animals (cf. Jotham's fable in Judg. 9:7–20).

The story itself concerns two great eagles,² a cedar, and a vine. The first eagle came to Lebanon, broke off the newest growth of a mighty cedar, and carried it off to a land of merchants,³ that is, Babylon (Ezek. 17:4; cf. 16:29). In the cedar's place, the eagle planted a vine, giving it every possible advantage. He provided for it fertile soil and abundant water supply, all the conditions necessary for maximal growth. In those conditions it spread out, producing branches and limbs but remaining low in stature (17:6).

Desiring more from its life, however, and observing that there was an alternative, the vine turned away from its first provider and sent its roots toward the second eagle. This bird is described in similar language to the first eagle—it too was powerful of wing and beautiful of plumage—yet

without the same fulsome glory as the first.⁴ It had done nothing for the vine, just as the first eagle had left nothing undone, yet the ungrateful vine turned its allegiance from the first to the second (17:7).

The fate of the vine is predictable. In seeking to gain something more, it will instead throw away everything it has been given. Turning its branches toward the second eagle is already a repudiation of its purpose as a fruitful, splendid vine (17:8). The second eagle will do nothing for it; all the vine will succeed in doing is arousing the anger of the first eagle, who will come and tear off its fruit and uproot it from its place. It will not be a difficult task for this powerful eagle to accomplish, whose activity throughout the parable contrasts with the passivity of the second eagle (17:9). The vine's chosen course of action is worse than foolish, it is suicidal.

As in the case of Jotham's fable in Judges 9, the political realities depicted in this fable are little more concealed from the original hearers than when in contemporary American political cartoons the Republican Party is depicted by an elephant and the Democrats by a donkey. So there is a certain irony in Ezekiel saying to his audience: "Do you not know what these things mean?" (Ezek. 17:12). His hearers could probably have supplied for themselves the interpretation that follows. The first eagle is the king of Babylon, while the cedar sprig is Jehoiachin, whom Nebuchadnezzar carried off to Babylon, along with Ezekiel himself. The "seed of your land" whom Nebuchadnezzar put in his place is clearly Zedekiah, Jehoiachin's uncle, whom Nebuchadnezzar installed in Jehoiachin's place. The second eagle is Egypt, from whom Zedekiah was seeking aid to break free from the Babylonian yoke.⁵

The meaning of the parable is therefore self-evident: Zedekiah's foreign policy is worse than foolish, it is suicidal. His revolt cannot stand on the basis of seeking help from a (disinterested) lesser superpower against the dominant superpower in the contemporary ancient Near East. Will he thrive? No way!

But is the fable's meaning as clear as it appears at first sight? Throughout the fable there are slightly discordant notes that do not fit with the straightforward, surface analysis. These remind us that the fable is a riddle as well as a parable; it conceals a deeper truth as well as reveals an obvious lesson. For instance, Lebanon is not only the proverbial home of all cedars but also the name of one of Solomon's palaces (cf. 1 Kings 7:2; Jer. 22:23).

So the discerning reader is invited to consider who planted "the cedar in Lebanon" in the first place. Who established the Davidic dynasty in Jerusalem? Further back still, who was it who had brought them "to the land of Canaan," just as Nebuchadnezzar brought Jehoiachin "to the land of merchants"?

Moreover, the vine planted in conditions suitable for growth is a classic picture of the Lord's provision for Israel (Isa. 5:1–7); indeed, the imagery of "no effort spared," which seems more than a little overdone with reference to Nebuchadnezzar, fits perfectly for the Lord's care. He is the One who, according to Psalm 80, brought a vine out of Egypt and cleared the ground in order to plant it in the Promised Land (Ps. 80:8–11). Likewise, Ezekiel's address to Judah as "this rebellious house" describes the history of their relationship with the Lord much better than their history (to date) with Babylon.

Taken together, these hints supply a deeper significance to the breaking of Zedekiah's oath of loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar. It is not simply that breaking an oath lawfully taken is a serious matter. It is not even that the oath Zedekiah was forced to swear was taken in the Lord's name and therefore he would act as guarantor to bring into effect the covenant curses attached to it. It is that there is a fundamental *analogy* between Zedekiah's rebellion against his covenant overlord, Nebuchadnezzar, and Israel's rebellion against her covenant overlord, God himself. If Zedekiah's abandoning of his (relatively) prosperous situation in favor of the Egyptian option is a suicidally foolish breach of the covenant relationship, what may we say about Israel's abandonment of the Lord and their history of rebellion against him?

Thus, at just the moment when it might seem that Ezekiel has unpacked the meaning of the fable, he launches into its *real* meaning with the word "therefore" (Ezek. 17:19). The fundamental significance of the picture is not exhausted by the political observation that a breach of the covenant with Nebuchadnezzar, sworn on oath, is suicide. Rather, as Greenberg notes, "the political transaction is used as a model from which a theological analogy is drawn." The political leadership in Judah has not only despised and broken Nebuchadnezzar's covenant (an act for which they will face the consequences); on a deeper level they have despised and broken the Lord's covenant (17:19; cf. the similar wording of 16:59). The result is that the

coming judgment is not merely a harsh taste of *Realpolitik*, but the judgment of God on a rebellious house. If the risk of rousing the Babylonian wrath ought to give pause to plans to send to Egypt for help (and it ought), how much more should the risk of the Lord's wrath give pause to a people willfully headed away from the One who planted them in a land flowing with milk and honey?

The deeper message of the fable thus paints the hopelessness of Zedekiah's revolt against Nebuchadnezzar in its blackest hues, pointing out that he was not just rebelling against the mighty Babylonians, but against the sovereign Lord, the God who made heaven and earth. At the same time, however, the latter part of this chapter also reworks the fable in more positive terms (17:22–24). The Lord himself, no longer acting through intermediaries, will take a new shoot from the cedar and plant it on a high and lofty mountain (17:22). A new cedar will grow on the mountain heights of Israel into a lofty tree, which will provide in its branches shelter for birds of all kinds (17:23). In contrast to the vine, which even in ideal conditions rebelled and failed to fulfill its potential (17:8), the cedar will achieve the eagle's initial purpose. In that way, all the trees of the field (the nations) will be brought to an understanding of the Lord's sovereignty in history, seeing that the rise and fall of empires is entirely his doing (17:24).

The interpretation of this postscript to the earlier fable is a straightforward development from the deeper level of meaning of those verses. What does the future hold after the Lord's judgment on Judah? Is there any hope for the uprooted vine? The logical answer would be no, but Ezekiel affirms, against all logic, that the Lord will intervene to reverse the failures of the past. Just as Nebuchadnezzar once installed Zedekiah, so Yahweh will install his own vassal on Mount Zion.⁸ In contrast to the vine that rebelled and would soon wither (17:7–10), the cedar of Yahweh's planting will thrive and bear fruit (17:23).

However, it is not simply a matter of rescuing the cedar sprig that has been carried off to Babylon and restoring Jehoiachin to the throne. The problem lies deeper than that, for the whole history of the monarchy is, from Ezekiel's perspective, one of failure. Yahweh will go back to the source, as it were, for a new shoot, though still from the same cedar tree. Though no hope is held out for the present cedar sprig (Jehoiachin) or the vine (Zedekiah), yet the death of the contemporary Davidides does not

mean the end of the road for the Davidic monarchy. The failure of all past Davidic kings to usher in God's kingdom does not mean an abandonment of God's promises to David of an eternal throne (2 Sam. 7:16). A new sprig from that same tree will be planted and will flourish under the blessing of Yahweh's protection. Indeed, his future greatness will far surpass that of the past monarchs of Israel, having a worldwide impact as the nations see God visibly at work establishing his kingdom.

Bridging Contexts

CODED SPEECH AS a tool of communication. In a country where free speech is considered sacrosanct, the vehicle of metaphorical speech is one to which contemporary prophets rarely resort. We can say what we think in plain, unequivocal terms. Such a luxury has not always been afforded to government critics down through the ages and is not permitted to many around the world in the days in which we live. In such situations, various forms of pictorial speech or coded message—parable, riddle, or allegorical or apocalyptic language—become popular. The superficial message may be couched in safely "unreal" terms, while allowing the deeper, coded message to be understood by initiates.¹⁰

But even in a context where free speech is permitted, metaphors, parables, and allegories can be powerful tools of communication, giving a fresh perspective on a familiar situation or bringing to light unrecognized parallels and similarities. That is why art and literature have so often had a critical role in bringing about social change. For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, probably had a far greater impact on the future of slavery in America than all the political speeches of her contemporaries. In a similar way, Ezekiel uses the political reality of Zedekiah's covenant with Nebuchadnezzar and its impending breach to bring home the spiritual reality of Israel's broken covenant with the Lord and its impending consequences. Playing fast and loose with one's covenant overlord is never wise and frequently fatal, whether that overlord is Nebuchadnezzar or God himself.

The consequences of breaking an ancient covenant. Yet some aspects of that comparison may well be lost on us as contemporary listeners. Because we are not familiar with the nature of covenant treaty documents,

we may be unaware that to break your oath of covenant loyalty was to call down on your own head all of the curses attached to that covenant. It was customary for such self-imprecatory curses to be attached to the end of an ancient Near Eastern covenant treaty document. Thus, after naming the gods who are summoned as witnesses of the oath, the treaty between the Hittite king Mursilis and Duppi-Tessub of Amurru concludes:

The words of the treaty and the oath that are inscribed on this tablet—should Duppi-Tessub not honor these words of the treaty and the oath—may these gods of the oath destroy Duppi-Tessub together with his person, his wife, his son, his grandson, his house, his land and together with everything that he owns.¹¹

It is not clear whether the Babylonians regularly imposed such an oath of allegiance on vassals in the name of their own gods, although the Assyrians clearly adopted that practice.¹² According to 2 Chronicles 36:13, Nebuchadnezzar had indeed made Zedekiah swear an oath in the name of God. When he broke such an oath, Zedekiah could hardly expect God's aid.

But it may well be that, like so many of his predecessors, it was not the Lord's aid he sought anyway, being content if he could merely gain substantial military assistance from Egypt. He hoped to play the two major regional superpowers, Babylon to the east and Egypt to the west, off against one another. It was a dangerous game to play. Similar strategies of seeking help from Egypt were in place in Isaiah's time, with no significant results (Isa. 30:1–7; 31:1–3). Yet in spite of that negative history, hope of help from Egypt sprang eternal in the hearts of those in power in Judah. Turning their back on their one true refuge, the Lord himself, they placed their hope in the chariots and horses whose ancestors had perished in the Red Sea (Ex. 15:4). Such an attitude was inevitably doomed to disaster.

The monarchy in Israel and Judah. The monarchy itself in Israel and Judah suffered for a similar mismatch between expectations and performance. God had made provision at the outset of Israel's history for that institution: Ancient prophecies had foretold it (Gen. 49:10; Num. 24:17) and the Mosaic Law had regulated it (Deut. 17:14–20). Yet when the people actually made the request for a king, their motivation was entirely

wrong. They wanted a king who would lead them and fight their battles for them, so that they could be like all the other nations around them (1 Sam. 8:20). They had forgotten that they were not called to be like the nations around them but to be God's own treasured possession, a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:6). They had apparently also missed the fact that in the immediately preceding chapter they had fared well enough in the second battle of Ebenezer, with "only" the Lord fighting for them (1 Sam. 7:2–14).

What happened was that they had transferred to the monarchy all the faith that their fathers had placed in the ark of the covenant. At the first battle of Ebenezer in 1 Samuel 4, their fathers looked to the ark to lead them into battle and to bring them automatic victory over their enemies. It did not work. Now their descendants were looking to a king to bring them automatic victory over their enemies. They didn't really trust God as their king, so they wanted to replace him by an earthly king, someone you could see and feel and touch. In that hope, they were going to be disappointed. Their deliverance came not from an ark or an earthly king, but from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

But God's plan for his people is ultimately gracious. He does not plan to destroy them. Do they want a king? He will give them a king. In fact, he will give them a whole series of kings to rule over them. Over the next five hundred years they will have a succession of all kinds of kings: good kings, bad kings, strong kings, weak kings. They will have more than enough kings for them to see that no earthly king can meet their needs. There will be no king who can provide them lasting shelter against the storms of life, a reality that found poignant expression in Lamentations 4:20: "The LORD's anointed, our very life breath, was caught in their traps. We thought that under his shadow we would live among the nations." What they really need is for the Lord himself to be their king, to establish the monarchy on a new footing as a lofty tree that will produce fruit and shelter, peace and prosperity (Ezek. 17:24).

Having shown the people throughout the pages of the Old Testament what kind of king they need, in Jesus God himself will come to be their king. He is the perfect king, fully obedient to God's laws, a king after God's own heart. He is a king who intercedes for his people like a prophet, a king who offers his own life up as a priest, a king who will not die and pass his

kingdom on to a line of depressingly inferior descendants. He is indeed the King of kings.

Contemporary Significance

LACK OF SPIRITUAL insight. We live in an age of intense political analysis. The nightly news is filled with the results of the latest polls, which are scrutinized for their potential impact on political thinking. Whenever major political changes take place, such as an election at home, an international trade treaty, or a major event like the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, there is an outpouring of words explaining how these events will affect our lives. In large measure, governments depend on such analysis to make their decisions. Yet in spite of the intense searchlight of analysis, politicians still can and do make phenomenal mistakes. Right up until the moment Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, intelligence reports apparently regarded such an outcome as unlikely. That miscalculation, along with Hussein's estimation that he could safely annex Kuwait, cost many lives on both sides.

Zedekiah's decision to rebel against Babylon was a miscalculation of similarly costly proportions. Encouraged perhaps by the Egyptians under Pharaoh Hophra, he sought to break free, only to discover too late that the Egyptians were freer with their words than with their military might. The intelligence analysis led him astray. Nebuchadnezzar came, as Ezekiel had warned, and judged the covenant-breaker, executing his sons in front of his very eyes and then putting his eyes out before taking him to Babylon in chains. Yet, disastrous as his foreign policy was for Judah, Ezekiel insists that Zedekiah's basic problem was not lack of political insight but lack of spiritual insight. It was not merely Nebuchadnezzar's covenant he had broken but the Lord's.

We suffer from the same rose-tinted myopia that Zedekiah did. On a societal level, we think the problem with our world is essentially political. If we were just able to kick the present set of bums out of office and elect people who agree with us, the world would instantly be a better place. So we pour our time and energy into political campaigns and boycotts and other efforts to bring about change through political means. On a personal level, we think the solution is to pour our time into gathering the

information necessary for wise decision-making. We read the consumer reports before we purchase a new car. We do our homework before we invest money in a particular stock, to ensure, as far as possible, that we will get a good rate of return for our money. We plan our careers years in advance, trying to make sure that we are in the right place at the right time to reach the very top. We try to make wise provision for our retirement years so that we will not be in want.

Now all of these things are good things to do, on a personal and societal level. We should work for political change and we should plan for the future. Yet we can be so busy doing the good things that we miss out on the one insight that is really necessary, the best thing: maintaining our personal and corporate spiritual life with God. But as Jesus reminds us: "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?" (Matt. 16:26).

How many people have planned for every eventuality they can encounter in life, yet have left out of the reckoning entirely their coming great encounter with God in death? Anyone who has ever talked to people in the streets or in their homes and asked them the question "If you were to die tonight, would you be sure of going to heaven?" can testify that many have never thought about their coming appointment with their Creator. Yet for all of us, the ultimate reality is not how much we have reformed the world or how well we have planned our money and our efforts. It is the fact that we will all one day have to stand before God to give account of what we have done.

God's answer to our hopeless situation. Perhaps one reason why we ignore that ultimate reality is that we do not wish to be confronted with the unpleasant truth. It is easier for us, like Zedekiah, to believe in comforting accounts of our own ability to stand on our own merits rather than to face the harsh facts of the untenability of our own position. We want to believe that we can change the world through our own efforts. We want to think that God ought to be impressed, at least somewhat, by our goodness and righteous acts. We prefer not to remember that we are helpless sinners on a collision course with a God of absolute purity and holiness, in whose presence sin cannot be tolerated. But if we accept the fact that we are all covenant-breakers in Adam as well as covenant-breakers on our own

account, how shall we stand on that day? Is our ultimate future as bleak as was Zedekiah's?

The answer lies in the new chip off the old block, the sprig of the cedar tree that God will plant. This new beginning from David's line will be a covenant-keeper, not a covenant-breaker like Zedekiah. He will not simply be a slightly improved version of the past, a political retooling of last year's model, but a radically new beginning. As a result, instead of scattering death and destruction in his wake, he will provide shelter and security not merely for Israel but for all of the nations of the earth.

The fulfillment of this prophecy is found in Jesus Christ. The angel Gabriel says of the child to be conceived in Mary's womb: "The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:32–33). Mary herself speaks in the *Magnificat* of a reversal of fortunes, furnishing the evidence of God's sovereignty: "He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble" (1:52). Jesus is the coming King, who reverses the fortunes of Israel by his covenant-keeping.

Jesus is definitively not merely a retooling of the past; rather, he is a radically different kind of ruler. He comes as a king—but a king who rides on a donkey (Matt. 21:5). He comes as the Prince of Peace—yet meets a bloody death on the cross. He is himself the Holy One of Israel—yet he eats with tax collectors and sinners (Matt. 9:11). The One who was by nature exalted humbles himself. In the Incarnation, he takes on human form, the form of a servant, and carries it all the way to the death of the cross. But the humble one is paradoxically also exalted.

His kingdom is like the mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds, which grows into a great tree, in whose branches the birds of the air find shade (Mark 4:30–32). Those who come to him receive in him every spiritual blessing (Eph. 1:3). He is not only the new king, he is himself the new temple planted on the high and lofty mountain of Israel (Ezek. 17:22; see 40:2). As the humble one is lifted up on the cross, he draws to himself by his elevation not only God's own people, Israel, but men and women from all nations as well (John 12:32). Because of his humility, he has now been exalted to the highest place and given the name above every name (Phil. 2:9).

In his humiliation and exaltation, Christ gives us a radically different model for leadership—and indeed for life. How much of our leadership style is based on our own abilities and efforts to get others to serve us? We build our kingdoms and our lives around our own analysis of the world, seeking to make the contacts and build the relationships we think will prosper us, heedless of God and his Word. The irony is that so often our efforts do not even achieve what we aimed at on a human, political level. How much more tragic, though, that in the process we have abandoned God and rebelled against him! Will such rebels prosper? By no means!

The good news, however, is that in spite of our weakness and folly, Christ's kingdom continues to grow and develop, based on his goodness and covenant faithfulness, not ours. Our rebellion and failure may have negative consequences in our own lives, but it cannot prevent God from achieving his purposes in the world. He may work slowly, from our perspective, through imperceptible growth from small beginnings rather than radical revolution, but his work is nonetheless effective. His tree provides perfect shelter and security for all of his own people. As he has planned, he will bring men and women from every tribe and nation to know himself, justified in the perfect obedience of their true king, the shoot of David, Jesus Christ.

Ezekiel 18

THE WORD OF THE LORD came to me: 2"What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel:

" 'The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'?

³"As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. ⁴For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son—both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die.

⁵"Suppose there is a righteous man who does what is just and right. ⁶He does not eat at the mountain shrines or look to the idols of the house of Israel. He does not defile his neighbor's wife or lie with a woman during her period. ⁷He does not oppress anyone, but returns what he took in pledge for a loan. He does not commit robbery but gives his food to the hungry and provides clothing for the naked. ⁸He does not lend at usury or take excessive interest. He withholds his hand from doing wrong

and judges fairly between man and man.

⁹He follows my decrees and faithfully keeps my laws.

That man is righteous; he will surely live,

declares the Sovereign LORD.

¹⁰"Suppose he has a violent son, who sheds blood or does any of these other things ¹¹(though the father has done none of them):

"He eats at the mountain shrines.

He defiles his neighbor's wife.

12He oppresses the poor and needy.

He commits robbery.

He does not return what he took in pledge.

He looks to the idols.

He does detestable things.

13He lends at usury and takes excessive interest.

Will such a man live? He will not! Because he has done all these detestable things, he will surely be put to death and his blood will be on his own head.

¹⁴"But suppose this son has a son who sees all the sins his father commits, and though he sees them, he does not do such things:

¹⁵"He does not eat at the mountain shrines or look to the idols of the house of Israel.

He does not defile his neighbor's wife.

16He does not oppress anyone
or require a pledge for a loan.
He does not commit robbery
but gives his food to the hungry
and provides clothing for the naked.

17He withholds his hand from sin
and takes no usury or excessive interest.
He keeps my laws and follows my decrees.

He will not die for his father's sin; he will surely live. ¹⁸But his father will die for his own sin, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother and did what was wrong among his people.

¹⁹"Yet you ask, 'Why does the son not share the guilt of his father?' Since the son has done what is just and right and has been careful to keep all my decrees, he will surely live. ²⁰The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him.

²¹"But if a wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, he will surely live; he will not die. ²²None of the offenses he has committed will be remembered against him. Because of the righteous things he has done, he will live. ²³Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?

²⁴"But if a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin and does the same detestable things the wicked man does, will he live? None of the righteous things he has done will be remembered. Because of the unfaithfulness he is guilty of and because of the sins he has committed, he will die.

25"Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Hear, O house of Israel: Is my way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust? ²⁶If a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin, he will die for it; because of the sin he has committed he will die. ²⁷But if a wicked man turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he will save his life. ²⁸Because he considers all the offenses he has committed and turns away from them, he will surely live; he will not die. ²⁹Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the

Lord is not just.' Are my ways unjust, O house of Israel? Is it not your ways that are unjust?

30"Therefore, O house of Israel, I will judge you, each one according to his ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. ³¹Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? ³²For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!

Original Meaning

THIS CHAPTER CONTINUES the pattern of pictorial speech found in the preceding chapters, but this time the proverb comes from the mouth of the people, not delivered from the Lord. It is an erroneous proverb—or at least a proverb erroneously applied—and such has been its misuse that the Lord swears that all use of it will be eliminated from Israel (18:3). The proverb runs: "The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (18:2), thus affirming that sometimes children suffer for their parent's actions rather than the parents themselves.

The application to which the people of Ezekiel's time had put the proverb is not hard to discern: "Our fathers sinned against God, but we their children (the generation of the Exile) are the ones paying the price; that's the way the world is and nothing can be done about it." A similar thought is expressed in Lamentations 5:7: "Our fathers sinned and are no more, and we bear their punishment." Jeremiah also confronted the same proverb (Jer. 31:29–30), which suggests that the idea had considerable currency around the time of the Exile.

The Lord's response to this proverb is a categorical denial of its applicability. Both father and son "belong" to the Lord; indeed, everyone belongs to him (Ezek. 18:4). The Lord is not only sovereign over all flesh, but he is also a just judge. There is no unfair attribution of punishment to the next generation for the sins of the fathers; instead, "the soul who sins is

the one who will die" (18:4), a maxim that had already been applied to the earthly judicial realm in Deuteronomy 24:16.

These assertions of the sovereignty and especially the justice of God are not random theological statements drawn from a treatise on the attributes of God. Rather, they are specifically designed to meet and address the temptations of those in exile. To the temptation to fatalistic despair, Ezekiel affirms God's sovereignty. Life is not in the hands of blind Kismet, who capriciously dispenses undeserved sufferings. To the temptation to question God's goodness, Ezekiel affirms the justice of God's ways. These specific temptations and their answers underlie the course of the disputation that follows.

The first part of that disputation is a case study covering three successive generations, presented in the form of priestly case law.² The formula "If a man . . ." followed by the judicial verdict is comparable to that found in Leviticus 20:9–21. The three generations described are a righteous man who is succeeded by a wicked son, who is in turn followed by a repentant, righteous son. The behavior of each is assessed against a "checklist" of righteous behaviors, a kind of miniature Ten Commandments.³

This list covers three basic areas of morality, which may be broadly categorized as piety, chastity, and charity. The first man mentioned is orthodox in his religious practice: He does not eat on the mountains (Ezek. 18:6); that is, he is not involved in the idolatrous cults of the high places (see 6:3–7). Nor does he lift his eyes to Israel's idols—a gesture suggesting an appeal to the idols for help.⁴ As with the Decalogue, undivided commitment to the Lord is the primary token of obedience. Moreover, he does not commit adultery with his neighbor's wife, nor does he lie with a woman during her menstrual period (18:6). The latter was prohibited in Leviticus 18:19 on account of the ritual uncleanness contracted by this flow of blood, as with other bodily discharges.

In addition, this righteous man does not oppress those in debt to him; instead, he returns objects given to him as security for a debt (Ezek. 18:7). This may mean faithfulness in returning the poor man's garment to him by nightfall so that he has something to sleep in, as required in Exodus 22:25, or it may simply mean actually returning the pledge once the debt has been repaid. There were a multitude of ways in which an unscrupulous lender could take advantage of the desperate. Far from robbing, however, this

righteous man feeds and clothes the poor out of his own resources (Ezek. 18:7). He does not lend at interest; such "loan sharking" was prohibited in Leviticus 25:36–37, where it is clear that the person concerned was in desperate need and thus open to exploitation. The righteous person draws back from all such wrongdoing and practices true justice between people (Ezek. 18:8). To summarize, this person "follows my decrees and faithfully keeps my laws" (18:9). What is the verdict on such a person? "That man is righteous; he will surely live."

On the other hand, suppose this man's son is the antithesis of all his father stands for. He does everything bad his father abhorred and fails to do any of the good things his father did. Point by point, Ezekiel checks off his sins. What is to be the verdict on such a person? "Will such a man live? He will not!" He will die, and his death will be no one's fault but his own (18:13).

But suppose this second man also has a son who swims against the tide. He is like his grandfather in doing what is good and right, not like his wicked father. He sees what his father does and deliberately follows a different course. His life is again a model of piety, chastity, and charity. What is the verdict on the third generation? According to the proverb of 18:2, he ought to face the inexorable consequences of his father's misdeeds. But according to Ezekiel, "he will surely live" (18:17). His father will be judged on the basis of his sins and die (hence, he will not be rescued by the first generation's righteousness). But the son will be judged on the basis of his own record and will live (hence, he will not die on account of his father's sin). In the heavenly court, as in the earthly court (Deut. 24:16), "the soul who sins is the one who will die" (Ezek. 18:20).

At this point, Ezekiel envisages a hypothetical objection: "What! Does the son not share the guilt of the father?" (18:19a, pers. trans.). By providing this *reductio ad absurdum*, the complaint of Ezekiel's audience is undermined. In such a clear case, no one can dispute the justice of Ezekiel's assertion: "Since the son has done what is just and right and has been careful to keep all my decrees, he will surely live. The soul who sins is the one who will die" (Ezek. 18:19b–20). But to accept this as God's way is necessarily to abandon the applicability of the original proverb to their situation. If this generation is experiencing the "death" of exile and if God

deals justly with each generation, then the only possible conclusion is that they too must also be tarred with guilt before God.

The point Ezekiel is making is not that the previous generation was any less guilty than the present generation. Far from it! He has already characterized Jerusalem's earliest roots as pagan (16:3), and he will shortly describe the history of Israel from the desert period on as one of continuous rebellion (20:4–29). To make the picture match Israel's history, all three generations have to be identified with the second generation: the epitome of wickedness. But Ezekiel's point is that the present generation is not guiltless. They themselves have shared in the sins of past generations, as 20:30–32 makes explicit. Therefore, although the judgment they are now undergoing is certainly in part a judgment on the result of the sins of previous generations, the present generation are not innocent bystanders but guilty bystanders. They too have shared in eating the sour grapes, so they cannot pass the buck for the unpleasant aftertaste onto others. God's dealings with them have been nothing other than perfectly just.

But if that point is accepted, then the possibility of despair becomes real.⁸ If God is indeed judging this generation for its sin, what is the point of even trying to please him? If they are condemned sinners, what room is there for hope? Since their death sentence is decreed, ought they not simply to eat, drink, and try to be merry in the time that remains to them?

By no means! Ezekiel 18:21–32 addresses that question by propounding another pair of case studies. The first concerns a wicked person who turns from his sins and does what is right (18:21). Will such a person not live? Indeed he will, for the Lord takes no pleasure in putting to death the sinner. Grace is possible for the one who repents; his transgressions will be remembered no more (18:22–23). By contrast, the righteous person who "repents" of his righteousness and abandons his service of God will not escape judgment. Right standing before God is not capital that can be banked, either by oneself or one's ancestors, allowing one to live on the accrued interest. Apostasy is always a fearful possibility to be reckoned with.

Thus, just as this generation is not guiltless but brings on its own head divine judgment, so also as long as it exists, this generation is not fixed on its present course. Change, real change, is always possible—for better or for worse! This is fundamentally the reason for which Ezekiel was appointed a

watchman back in chapter 3 so that the wicked might be turned from their ways to a godly way of life, and the righteous be warned not to fall away.

In all this, is God not just? The problem, says Ezekiel, is not God's lack of justice. The problem is with Israel's lack of justice. The problem is not that God has not judged this present generation according to what they deserve. Rather, it is that they deserve all too fully the judgment that has fallen on them. But that is only part of the story. The essential point the prophet is making is introduced by the word "therefore" in verse 30.9 Judgment is coming! God will judge Israel, not unjustly or capriciously but according to their ways. In the past, he has shown justice abundantly tempered with mercy to Israel. They have repeatedly fallen short of God's standard, loving their transgressions more than they love God. What is more, in the present they continue in the way of their fathers. If the proverb were true, they would be condemned for sure.

But even now it is not too late! Even wicked, condemned sinners can still leave their transgressions behind, repent, and acquire for themselves¹⁰ a new heart and new spirit (18:31). Even now death is not inevitable. They can still return to the God of all grace and live (18:32). If they do so, God will not turn them away but will give them what they seek and what he has already promised: a new heart and a new spirit (11:19). Everything that precedes it—the case studies, the declaration of God's justice, the statement of God's mercy—everything leads up to the passionate appeal to turn from death, to choose life and live (cf. Deut. 30:15–20)!

Bridging Contexts

THE CORPORATE NATURE of Ezekiel 18. All too often Ezekiel 18 has been treated as if drawn from the pages of a systematic theology textbook. Frequently, the result of this approach has been to hail the prophet as introducing a new theological idea into Israel, that of "individual responsibility." Previously, so the argument goes, Israelites thought in terms of "corporate responsibility," but Ezekiel cleared the way for the New Testament by asserting the standing of the individual soul before God.¹² Such an idea appeals to our individualistic age, but it is not founded in the text.

In our exposition, we have demonstrated that the case studies, though they describe hypothetical individuals, actually are building an argument that applies to Ezekiel's generation as a whole. It was *the corporate group* (the "house of Israel," 18:25, 29–30) on whom judgment had come and who is urged to repent and turn once more to the Lord. This same corporate emphasis is found elsewhere in Ezekiel. Israel's long history of sin has now made their final doom inevitable (cf. Ezek. 20).

However, that fate does not descend on an innocent generation but one that is also guilty of the same sins as its predecessors. The corporate nature of judgment is not arbitrary, any more than is the corporate aspect of salvation, but it is bound up with the transmission of those same sinful characteristics on to the next generation. Following the example of the fathers, the children have also been eating sour grapes. Just as the blessings of the covenant community are not transmitted to the next generation as something separate from their parent's faith, so also the covenant curse is transmitted in company with unbelief.

A similar theme emerges in the books of Judges to Kings, where repeated cycles of apostasy reach a point of no return with the excesses of Manasseh, from which not even the reform of Josiah can rescue Judah (2 Kings 23:26).¹³ Yet at the same time, the generations after Manasseh are not excused. Though Josiah is righteous and receives the reward of at least being buried in his own tomb (23:30), the four kings leading up to the exile (Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah) each do evil in the eyes of the Lord. Punishment for the sins of their forebears falls not on the heads of the innocent but the guilty. The question being addressed by Ezekiel, then, is not whether judgment is corporate, but whether that corporate judgment is just or not.

Indeed, the very categories Ezekiel utilizes—"righteous/unrighteous," "life/death"—are corporate categories in the Old Testament. The "legal lists" were not expressions of some impersonal entity called "Right" or "Natural Law" or "Truth." The prophets would never have begun their arguments with the words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident. . . ." To be righteous was to be in right relationship with the Lord, to accept him as your overlord, and therefore to accede to his demands on your life.

Necessarily, rightly relating to the Great King involved rightly relating to his friends and enemies as well. Thus, righteousness prohibited idolatry

(giving allegiance to any other overlord) and taking advantage of the poor (oppressing the King's people). Chastity and purity were prerequisites to entering his presence. To be unrighteous, on the other hand, was to live as the antithesis of an obedient vassal, consorting with the King's enemies and doing the things he had forbidden. The law was an expression of the wisdom of the Great King that provided opportunity for the vassal to express loyalty.

The one who is faithful to these requirements will "live," that is, enjoy the fullness of relationship with the Great King that flows from obedience. Such life is not merely physical existence, or even the future hope of return from exile, but a place among the people of the King in the presence of the King. Death, on the other hand, means estrangement from both God and the covenant community, along with all of the blessings that went with that status. To be cut off from God's people is to be "dead" even while physically still alive, for one would be separated from the source of life. There is no life apart from the Source and Giver of life; as Deuteronomy 30:20 puts it: "The LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

The individual dimension. Yet this stress on the corporate nature of both life and death, of blessing and curse, should not blind us to the fact that these elements have always had an individual dimension to them in the Bible. As early as the Flood, God was concerned to rescue the righteous out of the midst of the judgment (Gen. 6:9). "Righteous" Lot (as Peter calls him in 2 Peter 2:7) was similarly delivered out of the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah, though his unbelieving sons-in-law were consumed in the conflagration. Joshua and Caleb, the two spies to bring a positive report of the Promised Land, were the only two from that generation to enter it (Num. 13–14). When Ahab's sin resulted in drought, God provided supernaturally for Elijah first by means of ravens and then by means of a foreign widow (1 Kings 17). In the midst of the judgment that finally falls on the wicked for their sin, God is able to protect his own.

Contemporary Significance

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL. When I was growing up, two of the top three things we were never allowed to say were, "It's not my fault," and, "It's not fair."

(The other was, "I couldn't help it.") Those very phrases are, in effect, what Ezekiel's contemporaries were saying to God by using the parable about the fathers having eaten sour grapes and the children having their teeth set on edge. As they suffered the discipline of God in the Exile, their first response was, "This is not our fault," which in turn led logically to the accusation, "God, that's not fair." Ezekiel's response is to affirm that, along with previous generations, it is indeed their fault. It is not God's unfairness but their sin that is the problem. They are simply in denial about the true nature of their case. But Ezekiel doesn't take away their excuses in order to leave them crushed under the full impact of God's law. He pleads with them even now to turn and live.

The question of why bad things happen in this world is a problem for anyone who thinks about the world at all, who lives beyond the level of momentary feelings. That's why Rabbi Harold Kushner's book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*¹⁵ was such a best-seller. The issue he posed is a real one—even if the answer he gave to that question was seriously flawed. His solution is that God means well but is ultimately unable to prevent everything bad from hitting home. According to him, God is like a good parent, doing everything in his power to protect his children, but ultimately powerless against the intrusions of chaos into the order of the world and the free expression of evil on the part of those he has created.

Those of us who believe in the God whom the Bible reveals have a problem with Rabbi Kushner's "solution," however. ¹⁶ It is based on a wrong picture of God. The Bible portrays God as victorious over the forces of chaos from the beginning of Genesis on. Nothing can stand against his omnipotent, creative word. The mighty Egyptian army is smothered by the Red Sea when it seeks to make bad things happen to God's people. As a general principle, the writer of Proverbs teaches us that there is no such thing as chance in this world: "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD "(Prov. 16:33). Nor is the Lord helpless even against the decisions of wicked people. Indeed, he declares in Isaiah 8 that he will use the fierce and godless ruler of the Assyrians to execute judgment on his own people. No, the problem is not with God's power.

Recognizing that reality, the temptation is for us to oversimplify in a different direction. We may baldly reply to Rabbi Kushner in words that sound superficially like those of Ezekiel: "Bad things don't happen to good

people, for there are no good people. Bad things only happen to bad people, for we are all bad." Certainly there is a strong element of biblical truth in that statement. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," says Paul in Romans 3:23. Thus, we are all bad people, who deserve much more in the way of bad things than we ever receive in this life.

A "pro-life" God. Yet that approach oversimplifies the problem in a different direction by suggesting that there is only one reason why these bad things are happening, which is as a punishment from God because of our sin. Ultimately, this approach leads to the kind of question we find the disciples asking Jesus when they encountered a man born blind: "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). In the face of profound personal tragedy, we are content merely to debate suffering as an interesting theological issue, considering our duty done if we prove God "not guilty" of the charge of unfairness.

Not so, says Ezekiel! Certainly he answers the theological issue, but important though the issue is, he doesn't stop there. He is concerned not merely to demonstrate that God is just in condemning his people to death, but also to show that in spite of everything they have done, God is resolutely "pro-life." Even when the "life" in question is the life of those who have rebelled against him, God desires that they should turn and live. He therefore presses on from the abstract theological issue ("Where does this suffering come from?") to the intensely personal issue ("What is your relationship to God?").

You see, though suffering in this life ultimately flows from Adam's sin, a sin in which we corporately share not as innocent bystanders but as guilty coconspirators, yet it also has a multitude of diverse purposes in the providence of God. Some suffering has indeed as its purpose the judgment of sinners, here and now. Those who flout the Word of God find that there is often a price to pay. In other cases, however, suffering has a redemptive purpose, providing the occasion for those outside the kingdom to be brought to an awareness of their need for God. So Ezekiel faces his contemporaries with the challenge posed by their exile. He confronts them passionately with the need to choose between life and death, to choose between repenting and turning to God or continuing on their present course, with all of its ultimate consequences.

What did Jesus say in answer to the disciples' question as to which one had sinned, the man born blind or his parents? His answer was: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned . . . but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life" (John 9:3). This suffering, says Jesus—indeed all suffering—is a work of God in the world. As we have noted, it sometimes has a redemptive purpose and sometimes a purpose of judgment. The latter should indeed not surprise us since we are sinners, born to sinners. God will certainly be glorified in executing judgment on sin. The truly surprising part is the first part: that God, through suffering, works for good in us and others, redeeming us, deepening our devotion to him, and drawing others to himself through us. The real question we face in this topsy-turvy world is: "How can bad things achieve a good purpose in bad people?"

The ultimate answer. The full answer to that question comes only at the cross. There God brought to remembrance my sins and the sins of all of his people so that they might not be remembered finally against us (Ezek. 18:22). Those sins must be dealt with. They cannot simply be swept under the carpet. The death penalty that they deserve must be executed. Someone must surely die for them. But there at Calvary, instead of putting me to death, or even me and my children for my sins, he put to death rather his own Son, his own beloved Son, who had no sin of his own.

We have not begun to grasp the reason why we suffer if we have not first considered the suffering of Christ in our place. For it was on the cross that his suffering made it possible for my suffering to be for good, for God's glory in my redemption, for God's glory in my growth in grace. That doesn't make it any less suffering. It is indeed painful, frequently very painful, as we endure it. But it does mean that for Christians, suffering is not for our judgment but is the means of God's gracious work in our lives, by which we are increasingly conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.

Ezekiel's passion to convey that message of life for everyone who will repent fits the cost paid by Jesus to make it possible. What can we say, however, about our own anemic efforts to share the good news? Faced with the reality of millions going to a lost eternity, do we form debating clubs to bat around the issue of the fate of those who have never heard of Jesus? Do we sit around and argue about the sociological factors that have caused so many fewer people to go to church nowadays than thirty years ago? Or do

we rather determine that if sinners will go to hell, it will at least be over our dead bodies? As Charles Haddon Spurgeon put it:

Oh, my brothers and sisters in Christ, if sinners will be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our bodies; and if they will perish, let them perish with our arms about their knees, imploring them to stay, and not madly to destroy themselves. If hell must be filled, at least let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions, and let no one go there unwarned and unprayed for.¹⁸

The only appropriate response to the cross is to plead and exhort and pour out our lives to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ. Like Ezekiel, we must confront men and women here and now with their desperate need to turn from their sins and to receive forgiveness and new life through Christ, and thus live forever with God and his people.

Ezekiel 19

TAKE UP A LAMENT concerning the princes of Israel ²and say:

"'What a lioness was your mother among the lions! She lay down among the young lions and reared her cubs. ³She brought up one of her cubs, and he became a strong lion. He learned to tear the prey and he devoured men. ⁴The nations heard about him. and he was trapped in their pit. They led him with hooks to the land of Egypt. 5" 'When she saw her hope unfulfilled, her expectation gone, she took another of her cubs and made him a strong lion. ⁶He prowled among the lions, for he was now a strong lion. He learned to tear the prev and he devoured men. ⁷He broke down their strongholds and devastated their towns. The land and all who were in it were terrified by his roaring. ⁸Then the nations came against him, those from regions round about. They spread their net for him, and he was trapped in their pit. ⁹With hooks they pulled him into a cage and brought him to the king of Babylon. They put him in prison,

so his roar was heard no longer on the mountains of Israel. 10" 'Your mother was like a vine in your vinevard planted by the water; it was fruitful and full of branches because of abundant water. ¹¹Its branches were strong. fit for a ruler's scepter. It towered high above the thick foliage, conspicuous for its height and for its many branches. ¹²But it was uprooted in fury and thrown to the ground. The east wind made it shrivel. it was stripped of its fruit; its strong branches withered and fire consumed them. ¹³Now it is planted in the desert, in a dry and thirsty land. ¹⁴Fire spread from one of its main branches and consumed its fruit. No strong branch is left on it fit for a ruler's scepter.'

This is a lament and is to be used as a lament."

Original Meaning

BY NOW, WE ARE familiar with the versatility with which the prophet delivers his message. Here, while continuing the pictorial speech of the last few chapters, Ezekiel moves from prose into poetry, adopting the form of a lament or dirge.

A lament was a common and distinctive form of song, frequently sung at a funeral, extolling the virtues of the departed and grieving the tragic circumstances surrounding the person's death. A classic example is found in 2 Samuel 1:19–27, where David mourns the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. In the hands of the prophets, however, the genre underwent a change of perspective, for the catalogue of virtues of the departed became a list of faults, while the tragic circumstances of the demise were projected into the future rather than simply recorded from the past. To conduct a "funeral service" for a still-living patient may not always be considered in the best of taste, but it is an effective way of communicating the certainty with which a death is anticipated! This certainty is particularly striking following on from Ezekiel 18, where the wicked man has been summoned to turn and live.

Ezekiel's lament is made up of two distinct images: a lioness and her cubs, and a vine and its branches. At first sight, these images seem distinct and unconnected. However, both were familiar images for the royal tribe of Judah, and the images are brought together, albeit in a different way, in Jacob's blessing of a ruler who would come from the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:9–11).³ When the familiar imagery was combined with the familiar meter (and musical style?) of lament, it would have been immediately apparent to Ezekiel's listeners that what they heard was "a lament concerning the princes of Israel" (Ezek. 19:1).⁴

The first image is of a mother lioness who produces a number of cubs.⁵ Out of them, she chooses one to be the leader of the pack. He behaves in lionlike fashion, tearing the prey and even consuming people (19:3). As a result, he is hunted by the nations,⁶ captured, and carried off to Egypt (19:4). In his place, she appoints a second cub, who acts with even greater destructiveness (19:6–7). He too is hunted by the nations, captured, and carried into exile, this time to Babylon.

As with the imagery of Ezekiel 16–17, historical facts are built into the picture, resulting in an occasionally incongruous mixture of metaphor and reality. The first cub clearly represents Jehoahaz, who, after a brief three-month reign in 609 B.C., was carried off to Egypt by Pharaoh Neco (2 Kings 23:33–34). His reign is described as tearing the prey and devouring men (Ezek. 19:3). This carnivorous blood lust is sometimes understood not as a blameworthy feature, but simply as describing the normal growth and development of the king within the chosen metaphor. However, given the extension of the metaphor in 19:6 and further in 22:25, where the behavior

is clearly reprehensible, that seems unlikely. Rather, it seems probable that Ezekiel exploited an ambiguity that is inherent within the metaphor.

The comparison of kings and lions was old and well established, yet the imagery contains the possibility of powerful men acting like wild beasts that have the capacity to empty the land (2 Kings 17:26). A poetic figure that in some contexts is strongly positive (Gen. 49:9; Deut. 33:20) can in other contexts become a figure of fierce cruelty (Prov. 28:15; Nah. 2:12–13). In terms of the brevity of Jehoahaz's reign, this negative characterization is probably somewhat stylized, yet he may have begun the policies for which his successor Jehoiakim is criticized in Jeremiah 22:13–17.

The second lion behaves similarly to the first, tearing prey and devouring men (Ezek. 19:6). In addition, he "broke down their strongholds" and devastated their towns," behavior that breaks out of the metaphorical realm (i.e., behavior appropriate to lions) into the literal realm (i.e., behavior appropriate to kings). The lament is unclear as to whose towns are devastated and which land is terrified of him. Normally, such language would apply to the lion's foes. Yet it is sufficiently ambiguous to cover the actual destruction wreaked on the lion's own country, Judah, whose towns and cities were destroyed as a result of the foolish policies of successive kings.9 This second lion too, having behaved like a wild animal, was hunted down.

The identity of the second lion has been the object of much debate. The primary choices are Jehoiachin, with whom Ezekiel was exiled, or Zedekiah, his successor, who was exiled in 586 B.C. If the lion metaphor is taken as a separate unit, then Zedekiah is probably the best choice. However, if the entire chapter is viewed as a two-image picture, with a change of metaphor between the first and second images, then Jehoiachin fits best as the second lion, while Zedekiah is then reserved for the second image, that of a vine and its branches. Although much attention has been devoted to the question, the meaning of the passage is not significantly altered by which identification is adopted; the point is that the current rulers of Judah are simply the latest outcroppings of the rock of oppression and pride from which they were hewn.

In the second image, a vine is planted in a vineyard¹² beside abundant waters. The perfect conditions provided for her lead to abundant growth,

and in particular many strong branches suitable for a ruler's scepter (19:11). It towers high above the clouds¹³ but, as may be expected, pride goes before a fall, and the lofty vine is uprooted, withered by the east wind and stripped of its fruit (19:12). Its strong branches are burned, and the vine is replanted in the desert, in a dry and thirsty land (19:13). Indeed, the destructive fire itself comes from one of the branches and consumes its fruit; the result is that no strong branch is left suitable for a ruler's scepter (19:14).

Once more, the picture is not difficult to decode. The vine is Judah, planted by the Lord in perfect conditions. As a result, she produces many scions capable of ruling. But pride is her downfall. In wrath, the Lord uproots her and withers her, replanting her outside the Promised Land, back in the desert of exile. The fire, which started in one of the branches (Zedekiah), results not simply in a loss of the fruit (destruction of land/people) but also in the annihilation of all the other strong branches (potential rulers). In Zedekiah, the Davidic dynasty will come to a sudden end, at least for the present.

Echoes of chapter 17 are evident throughout this second picture. Both describe a vine planted in conditions suitable for growth (17:5–6), then uprooted in wrath (17:9) and shriveled by the east wind (17:10). The tall tree is brought low (17:24). Though the focus is different, placed on divine action rather than human action, the conclusion for Zedekiah is the same: no escape.

Bridging Contexts

THE OPTIMISM OF contemporary culture. The genre of lament is not a familiar one to contemporary readers, especially in an American context. We live in a culture that is inherently optimistic, which cannot accept the possibility of a definitive verdict of death. We believe in surprising comebacks, in victory snatched from the jaws of defeat, and especially in happy endings. The writer Christopher Lasch comments: "American historical writing takes little account of the possibility of tragedy—missed opportunities, fatal choices, conclusive and irrevocable defeats. History has to have a happy ending."¹⁴

Perhaps the closest we normally come to encountering this genre in our culture is in the character of Ebenezer Scrooge, who has become traditional Christmas viewing in one film incarnation or other of Charles Dickens' novel *A Christmas Carol*. Like the princes of Israel, Scrooge hears ahead of time the sound of his own funeral. In keeping with the dictates of our culture, however, Scrooge receives the warning in time and is reformed, resulting in the requisite happy ending.

For Judah under Zedekiah, there is no prospect of a happy ending. Her fate is sealed, along with his; doom, defeat, and despair await them. The lions will be trapped; the vine will be chopped down from its lofty position and replanted not in the Promised Land but in a dry and desert land. The ruler's scepter is gone. Even though there is ultimate hope, as Ezek. 17:22–24 makes clear, the present situation is one of unmitigated doom. What makes it worse is the fact that it is unmitigated doom in spite of God's good promise. For back in Genesis 49:8–12, a passage with close links in imagery to Ezekiel 19, God promised that the scepter would never depart from the line of Judah, whom he compares to a young lion. But even God's promises cannot be presumed on, if taken out of context. The scepter will indeed depart from Judah, at least for the present time, because of the sins committed by those who held it.

Often the optimism of our culture carries over into the church. During a conversation on the difficulty of church planting in England, an American pastor once remarked to me, "Given \$60,000 and two years, I can plant a church here in the United States." Of course, such invincible optimism is not all bad. The pessimism that characterizes my own British culture adopts as its favorite text, "[This is] the day of small things" (Zech. 4:10). It needs to hear the words of Jeremiah: "Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you" (Jer. 32:17). We should indeed believe that with God all things are possible. But to be true to God's Word, optimism must always be optimism in God's power combined with a healthy pessimism in our own abilities. God can do all things with or without us; without him, we can do nothing (compare Ps. 127:1–3).

Even where that basic point is affirmed in theory, cultural optimism sneaks into our assessment of the church and its mission in practice. Our natural tendency inclines us to believe that small churches ought to grow into larger churches, that missionaries ought to see significant numbers of converts, and that our ministries will certainly prosper, provided we

faithfully follow biblical guidelines. This is particularly evident in the exclusive adoption of the biblical imagery of farming and harvest by the church growth movement in their description of missions.

The logic of the argument goes as follows: The church's mission is to gather God's harvest; like any good farmer, God seeks to maximize his production; his strategy (and therefore ours) will be to send workers to where the harvest is most ripe. The possibility of God's calling people to the kind of ministry exercised by Isaiah or Ezekiel may be acknowledged, but it is immediately discounted as an unusual situation. According to this position, the norm *ought* to be successful ministry! But where does such confidence come from? Is it not a version of the view of history described by Christopher Lasch, only given a Christian spin, so that it issues in the conviction that *church* history must have a happy ending?

A reality check. Ultimately, of course, church history does have a happy ending. The final chapters of Revelation assert that no matter what happens in between now and then, the church's position is ultimately secure. In the person of Christ, the promise of God that the scepter will not depart from the line of Judah will be ultimately fulfilled. As the bride of Christ, we are being prepared for the day when Christ will return to make all things new. But does that ultimate optimism allow for, indeed require, a similar optimism for the present, the time between the times? Can we say that we should expect the progress of the church to be smoothly and consistently in a forward direction?

Church history to date hardly seems to support such a notion. What we need is a strong reality check. Areas where the early church was strong are now virtually without a gospel witness; areas that were at the heart of the Reformation now see empty churches and cold hearts. Is that indeed a call for God's workers to go elsewhere? The apostle Paul would not seem to support such an idea. He warned Timothy about the prospect of hard times ahead in ministry, with hearers who would rather turn aside to myths than hear the truth. However, instead of urging him to move on to find "whiter harvests," he told him to keep his head, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, and discharge the duties of his ministry (2 Tim. 4:1–5).

The truth is that there is no "norm" in God's work. He calls some to white harvests and notable "success." He calls others to faithful labor with little or no visible reward. Still others live in a day of cold, hard hearts, in

which the lack of faithfulness of God's people can only result in disaster for the church, unless God graciously sends revival. Sometimes he chooses not to send revival, and a church dies. In the short term, even if not in the long term, the possibility is real that church history may indeed be a record of tragedy—of missed opportunities, of fatal choices, of conclusive and irrevocable defeats. We may need to learn how to lament and weep before the Lord and recognize our sins and those of our fellow Christians that have caused God to depart from our midst. In the midst of the pain of our lamentation, however, our confidence may yet be placed in God's faithfulness. As Lamentations 3:22–24 puts it:

Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.

They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him."

Contemporary Significance

GOD'S WONDERFUL PLAN? "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." So runs one part of the presentation of the gospel known as "The Four Spiritual Laws," which has been popularized by Campus Crusade for Christ. This encouraging thought is certainly in line with our culture's optimistic outlook, but is it true? Can we legitimately tell people that God has a wonderful plan for their lives?

Criticism of the statement often runs along the lines that since some of the people to whom we speak are not going to be saved, it is inappropriate to tell them that God's plan for their life is wonderful. What is so wonderful about a plan that ends up in hell? But is it even legitimate to say to Christians, "God has a wonderful plan for your life"? May we legitimately address Christians with the proof text of this position, the Lord's words in Jeremiah 29:11: "I know the plans I have for you . . . plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future"?

In one sense, of course, we may. *Ultimately*, God does have a wonderful eternity prepared for his people. "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no

mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2:9). But the more pressing question involves the here and now, the inbetween time. The assertion that God has a wonderful plan for our lives often rings hollow when measured up against the realities of day-to-day life. Our lives are frequently more desert than well-watered place. We seem to spend more time at Marah, where the wandering Israelites found the water too bitter to drink, than at Elim, the place of rest with its twelve springs and seventy palm trees, overflowing with abundance (see Ex. 15:22–27).

If we have been sold a promise as Christians that "it's a wonderful life," then we may spend much time struggling with that reality. We may live in permanent denial of life's unpleasant realities or blame ourselves for failing to measure up, because if we were "really spiritual" life wouldn't be this way. The truth is, however, that our present existence is frequently less than wonderful, and the Bible never pretends that it ought to be otherwise. Jeremiah's words were addressed to people living in exile, experiencing in its full harshness the bitterness of life, who needed to be assured that in the midst of the distress, there was still hope for the future. He goes on to denounce those who promise short-term relief (Jer. 29:21–23)! Those who are living comfortably back in Judah, on the other hand, are addressed not with hope but with a message of certain destruction (e.g., Ezek. 24:8–10).

That destruction was coming on Judah in part because of the sins of their royal leaders. Proud and violent, they had led the people astray from God. Now God was indeed announcing his plan for their life, but it was not what they would call wonderful. Instead, it is a lament, a messenger of sure and certain death. That death would fall not only on the individuals concerned but also on the present Davidic house as a whole. There would be no more second chances, no replacement for Zedekiah as head of the line of David. Just as Isaiah's prophecy of a shoot growing from the stump of Jesse proclaimed the coming of the chain saw of God's judgment on the existing royal line (Isa. 11:1; how else, after all, would you end up with a "stump"?), so also Ezekiel surveys the recent history of the Davidic monarchy and writes on it in large letters, "Failure."

The fulfillment of God's ultimate plan. None of Israel's kings, not even the greatest, David himself, had been able to establish God's kingdom on earth. All of them ultimately failed. None of them could lead God's people

into their rest. So the prophet takes out his correction fluid and whites them out as the source of hope. In spite of God's promises, all that is left is a lament. What a depressing truth for Ezekiel's hearers! It means that all of their present hopes in any existing human figure must be crushed, and they must depend entirely on something new that God will do. Nor is there any direct statement in this passage of what form this "new thing" will take.

But the links back to Ezekiel 17 remind us not to forget how that chapter ends, with the promise of a fresh start, a new sprig from the cedar, a new Son of David, who will bring in nothing less than a new world (17:22–24). Isaiah's old prophecy likewise was not simply a statement that God would reduce the house of David to a stump, but that out of that stump a new shoot would grow, through whom God's purposes would be fulfilled (Isa. 11:2–16). Though Ezekiel laments the fate of the house of David, which is as good as dead, he serves the God who brings life from the dead. God's promises cannot ultimately be destroyed by human weakness and failure, not even by a long history of weakness and failure. In the end, every one of his promises to David will not fail but will be fulfilled in the true Son of David, Jesus Christ.

This passage thus gives both comforting and challenging news for all of us. What makes it challenging news for us is the fact that the same verdict delivered against the house of David stands against us and all of our best efforts. It is not simply the rulers of old who abused their position of power who have fallen short of the glory of God, it is all of us. Like the line of the kings of Israel and Judah, our personal histories are littered with a trail of wrecks. No matter who you are, no matter how squeaky clean your image, when God looks at your life, he writes across it in large letters, "Failure" (cf. Rom. 3:23).

Worst of all, that is true not simply of your most wicked moments, but of your best. It is not just when you are stabbing somebody in the back, or gossiping or stealing or committing adultery that you offend God. It is when you are helping a little old lady across the street, while underneath there is the sneaking thought, "Is anybody seeing what a wonderful person I am?" It is while you are praying in a prayer meeting, or giving to the poor, or feeding the hungry, while all along there is a corner of your heart that is a little impressed with your own goodness and that feels God ought to be impressed too.

Like Judah of old, what you need is not just another (slightly better) version of the same. We make New Year's resolutions and plans to quit this bad habit and abandon that sin and start to do this good thing and generally overhaul our lives. We think, "Next year, I'll be a little better than this. This year wasn't so great, perhaps, but next year things will be different." Ezekiel's lament tells us that New Year's resolutions aren't enough, just as a new Davidic king wouldn't be enough. God will have to do something far more radical to save us.

The good news is that in Jesus Christ God has done precisely such a radical new work. In spite of the failure of all of Judah's kings, good as well as bad, God sent another King, the true "Lion of the tribe of Judah" and "Root of David" (Rev. 5:5). In spite of your personal repeated failure, God has triumphed in Christ to win the salvation of all his people. But this Lion, far from tearing the prey and devouring men (Ezek. 19:6), has conquered by appearing as a Lamb, who has been slain on behalf of his people (Rev. 5:6).

The appearance of this Lamb of God opens a window into heaven that transforms our experience of present realities. Though the present we live in and the immediate future we face may be bleak and forbidding, "a dry and thirsty land" (Ezek. 19:13), that fact no longer devastates us because this world is not our home. It is merely our place of pilgrimage on a journey to our real home. Though now we lament, soon we will go to the place where laments will be no more. Though we now suffer, soon we will be worshiping at the feet of the Lamb in heaven. Though we place no confidence in the flesh, knowing that the glory of this world is passing away and people here will continually disappoint us and fail us, we have full confidence in God and in the efficacy of his promises. We believe that the ruler's scepter has been given into the hand of the Lord Jesus Christ, and ultimately he will rule the nations as King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 19:15–16). In that promise lies a sure and certain hope that our failures are not the end of the story. God's faithfulness is.

Ezekiel 20:1-44

IN THE SEVENTH YEAR, in the fifth month on the tenth day, some of the elders of Israel came to inquire of the LORD, and they sat down in front of me.

²Then the word of the LORD came to me: ³"Son of man, speak to the elders of Israel and say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Have you come to inquire of me? As surely as I live, I will not let you inquire of me, declares the Sovereign LORD.'

⁴"Will you judge them? Will you judge them, son of man? Then confront them with the detestable practices of their fathers ⁵ and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: On the day I chose Israel, I swore with uplifted hand to the descendants of the house of Jacob and revealed myself to them in Egypt. With uplifted hand I said to them, "I am the LORD your God." ⁶On that day I swore to them that I would bring them out of Egypt into a land I had searched out for them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most beautiful of all lands. ⁷And I said to them, "Each of you, get rid of the vile images you have set your eyes on, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt. I am the LORD your God."

8" 'But they rebelled against me and would not listen to me; they did not get rid of the vile images they had set their eyes on, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and spend my anger against them in Egypt.

9But for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations they lived among and in whose sight I had revealed myself to the Israelites by bringing them out of Egypt. 10Therefore I led them out of Egypt and

brought them into the desert. ¹¹I gave them my decrees and made known to them my laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. ¹²Also I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so they would know that I the LORD made them holy.

13" 'Yet the people of Israel rebelled against me in the desert. They did not follow my decrees but rejected my laws—although the man who obeys them will live by them—and they utterly desecrated my Sabbaths. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and destroy them in the desert. ¹⁴But for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations in whose sight I had brought them out. ¹⁵Also with uplifted hand I swore to them in the desert that I would not bring them into the land I had given them—a land flowing with milk and honey, most beautiful of all lands—¹⁶because they rejected my laws and did not follow my decrees and desecrated my Sabbaths. For their hearts were devoted to their idols. ¹⁷Yet I looked on them with pity and did not destroy them or put an end to them in the desert. ¹⁸I said to their children in the desert, "Do not follow the statutes of your fathers or keep their laws or defile yourselves with their idols. ¹⁹I am the LORD your God; follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. ²⁰Keep my Sabbaths holy, that they may be a sign between us. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God."

²¹" 'But the children rebelled against me: They did not follow my decrees, they were not careful to keep my laws—although the man who obeys them will live by them—and they desecrated my Sabbaths. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and spend my anger against them in the desert. ²²But I withheld my hand, and for the sake of

my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations in whose sight I had brought them out. ²³Also with uplifted hand I swore to them in the desert that I would disperse them among the nations and scatter them through the countries, ²⁴because they had not obeyed my laws but had rejected my decrees and desecrated my Sabbaths, and their eyes lusted after their fathers' idols. ²⁵I also gave them over to statutes that were not good and laws they could not live by; ²⁶I let them become defiled through their gifts—the sacrifice of every firstborn—that I might fill them with horror so they would know that I am the LORD.'

²⁷"Therefore, son of man, speak to the people of Israel and say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: In this also your fathers blasphemed me by forsaking me: ²⁸When I brought them into the land I had sworn to give them and they saw any high hill or any leafy tree, there they offered their sacrifices, made offerings that provoked me to anger, presented their fragrant incense and poured out their drink offerings. ²⁹Then I said to them: What is this high place you go to?'" (It is called Bamah to this day.)

³⁰"Therefore say to the house of Israel: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Will you defile yourselves the way your fathers did and lust after their vile images? ³¹When you offer your gifts—the sacrifice of your sons in the fire—you continue to defile yourselves with all your idols to this day. Am I to let you inquire of me, O house of Israel? As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I will not let you inquire of me.

³²" 'You say, "We want to be like the nations, like the peoples of the world, who serve wood and stone." But what you have in mind will never happen. ³³As

surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I will rule over you with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with outpoured wrath. ³⁴I will bring you from the nations and gather you from the countries where you have been scattered—with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with outpoured wrath. ³⁵I will bring you into the desert of the nations and there, face to face, I will execute judgment upon you. ³⁶As I judged your fathers in the desert of the land of Egypt, so I will judge you, declares the Sovereign LORD. ³⁷I will take note of you as you pass under my rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant. ³⁸I will purge you of those who revolt and rebel against me. Although I will bring them out of the land where they are living, vet they will not enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the LORD.

³⁹" 'As for you, O house of Israel, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Go and serve your idols. every one of you! But afterward you will surely listen to me and no longer profane my holy name with your gifts and idols. ⁴⁰For on my holy mountain, the high mountain of Israel, declares the Sovereign LORD, there in the land the entire house of Israel will serve me, and there I will accept them. There I will require your offerings and your choice gifts, along with all your holy sacrifices. ⁴¹I will accept you as fragrant incense when I bring you out from the nations and gather you from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will show myself holy among you in the sight of the nations. ⁴²Then you will know that I am the LORD, when I bring you into the land of Israel, the land I had sworn with uplifted hand to give to your fathers. ⁴³There you will remember your conduct and all the actions by which you have defiled yourselves, and

you will loathe yourselves for all the evil you have done. ⁴⁴You will know that I am the LORD, when I deal with you for my name's sake and not according to your evil ways and your corrupt practices, O house of Israel, declares the Sovereign LORD.' "

Original Meaning

AFTER FIVE CHAPTERS of largely pictorial speech—proverbs, riddles, parables, and laments—the prophet returns to the language of straightforward history. This change is marked by a renewed interaction between the prophet and his public. In Ezekiel 15–19, the word of the Lord comes to the prophet unsought, though in some cases in response to sayings that had become common currency among God's people. Now, however, the prophetic speech is triggered by an attempt on the part of the "elders of Israel" to inquire of the Lord, as in Ezekiel 14.

The "elders of Israel" were the lay leaders of the exilic community (see Jer. 29:1), and they appear at key points of Ezekiel's indictment of the people (Ezek. 8:1; 14:1; 20:1). In each case, the charge leveled against the elders is secret idolatry (8:11; 14:3), a sin they share with the people at large. The very ones who once led the people in receiving a foretaste of the pouring out of the Spirit (Num. 11:24–25) now lead the people in their spiritual adultery.²

It is now the summer of 591 B.C. The elders have assembled before Ezekiel in order to "inquire of the LORD" (Ezek. 20:1). Now, as a life-stance, "inquiring of the LORD" or "seeking the LORD" would have been commendable; indeed, in Amos 5:4 the Lord addresses the house of Israel in precisely those terms: "Seek me and live." But as Amos goes on to point out, seeking the Lord can never be simply one part of a broadly based religious strategy. Seeking the Lord is, by definition, exclusive: To seek the Lord means not to seek the calf idols of Bethel (Amos 5:5). But this is precisely where the elders fail the test. Because they are involved in the idolatrous practices of their ancestors, the Lord will not answer them.³ The door is so firmly closed in their faces that the prophet does not even bother to record the substance of their request. They might just as well not have said a word. In fact, they may not even have reached the point of framing

their question before they are cut off. It is not what they ask that the Lord finds unacceptable but who they are.4

Yet (perhaps surprisingly) the chapter does not end here. Although the Lord will not answer them in terms of what they are seeking, he has a message for them to hear, addressed directly to their sin (Ezek. 20:4–5; cf. 14:4). Ezekiel is called to join God in judging the elders by confronting them with their sin. He is to present to them a history of Israel from God's perspective. That is, it is a history that focuses not on Israel's history of cultural and political achievements but rather on their history of idolatry. Ezekiel is to confront the elders with "the detestable practices of their fathers" (20:4).⁵

The way in which Ezekiel challenges the elders with Israel's history has more than a little in common with chapter 18. It is essentially a story of three consecutive generations, with intended application to the present generation. The choice laid before each generation is obedience to the Lord's life-giving laws (Ezek. 20:11, 21; cf. 18:9) or death-dealing disobedience (20:23–25; cf. 18:13). The three generations Ezekiel chooses here for his case study are the generation who lived in Egypt at the time of the Exodus (20:5–10), the desert generation (vv. 11–15), and their children (vv. 18–23). Each generation's history is presented as a six-stage cycle:

- (1) The Lord's self-revelation (vv. 5–6, 11, 18–19)
- (2) A challenge to exclusive devotion (vv. 7, 12, 19–20)
- (3) Israel's rebellion (vv. 8, 13, 21)
- (4) The threat of the Lord's wrath (vv. 8b, 13b, 21b)
- (5) Wrath limited/deferred for the sake of the divine name (vv. 9, 14, 22)
- (6) Act of limited judgment (vv. 10, 17, 23)

According to this schema, each new generation is confronted for itself with a fresh revelation of the Lord. To each comes the gracious self-announcement "I am the LORD" (20:12, 20, cf. v. 5). The basis for this self-revelation is not Israel's merit but divine election and a covenant oath sworn by God to bring them to the Promised Land (Ezek. 20:5). His care for them was demonstrated in "searching out" the perfect location for them

to inhabit, "a land flowing with milk and honey, the most beautiful of all lands" (20:6). But this decisive act in Israel's history required a response on the part of Israel of exclusive devotion to the Lord. To the first generation, it meant getting rid of their vile images and the idols of Egypt (20:7). To the second generation, it meant obeying the Lord's decrees and laws given at Sinai (20:11–12).

Of these decrees, Ezekiel singles out for particular mention the Sabbath law. The Sabbath was foundational to the Israelite view of sacred time and community. In Exodus 31:16–17, the Lord said to Moses:

The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever. . . .

With its regular one day in seven observance, the Sabbath cut across the nature-based calendars of the pagans, which revolved solely around phases of the moon and agricultural seasons. Instead, it called God's people to march to the beat of a different drum, as a mark of submission to their covenant overlord. It was a sign of their liberation from bondage (for slaves are not in control of their schedule) but also a sign of their distinctiveness from other nations who had not been similarly redeemed. To profane the Sabbath was thus to abandon an essential element of their distinctiveness as the people of the Lord and to attempt, in effect, to "become like the nations around us." It is to refuse to follow the example that God himself set in Genesis 2:1–4. This same requirement ("Follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Keep my Sabbaths holy") is reiterated to the next generation as well (Ezek. 20:18–20).

But Israel's consistent response to this gracious self-revelation was rebellion. Three times that rebellion is detailed, not simply in general terms but specifically as the failure to keep themselves distinct in the terms of the requirements of stage (2) of the cycle (20:7, 12, 19–20). Three times the Lord threatened to pour out his wrath on them once and for all, destroying them utterly. Yet each time he held back his hand, not because such a judgment was in any sense undeserved, but for the honor of his name, lest the nations around Israel read her destruction as the Lord's inability to protect his own (cf. Num. 14:15–16).

Nonetheless, in each case limited judgment does fall: First-generation Israel exits Egypt and finds itself not in a beautiful land flowing with milk and honey but in the desert (Ezek. 20:10). The next generation does not inherit the Promised Land either but are doomed to die in the desert (20:15). The third generation not only fails to inherit the Promised Land but will be scattered among the nations (20:23). The upraised hand, swearing on oath to bring the chosen people into the land of promise (20:5), now becomes an upraised hand swearing on oath that this generation shall never enter (20:15), and finally swearing that they will rather go into exile (20:23). The unfaithful elect experience the covenant curses, not the covenant blessings.

In addition, in place of God's good decrees and statutes (20:11), this generation is handed over to "not good" statutes, laws that led not to righteousness and life but to defilement and death (20:25).¹² These "not good" statutes meant not only death for them but death for their firstborn sons, offered up in the fire to Molech.¹³ The end point of Israel's story is thus the utter reverse of the goal at the beginning. Israel, the Lord's "firstborn son" (Ex. 4:22), was to be freed from Egypt so that he could offer pure worship in the Promised Land (4:23). But through their rebellion the Israelites instead end up sacrificing their own firstborn sons in the pursuit of defiled worship, with the threat of inevitable exile hanging over them like a Damoclean sword.

To this threefold cycle of gracious election, rebellion, and limited judgment, a coda is added in Ezek. 20:27–29, briefly bringing the story up to date. Lest anyone should argue that Ezekiel is raking up old history long forgotten, he replies that the history of Israel's occupation of Canaan is similarly depressing. Their ongoing love affair with the high places and their defiled worship proves that they are under God's judgment, even in the sworn land of promise (20:28), down to this very day ('ad hayyôm hazzeh, the last words of 20:29). Today is, after all, Ezekiel's interest, as the repetition of the phrase in 20:31 makes clear. Israel's present is exactly the same as Israel's past: vile images, child sacrifice, and idolatry (20:31). Surely Israel is a rebellious house, not just in times past but in the present, as the Lord had made clear to Ezekiel in 2:3. Such people need not expect any reply to their attempts to inquire of the Lord (20:31).

But what should they expect from the Lord? The answer given in 20:32–44 may surprise us, though it is already implicit in the account Ezekiel has

given of Israel's history. God will act, not to destroy his people utterly but rather to fulfill his original purposes in election: to establish a purified people to worship him (20:40–41). He will do this through a new exodus, not because of any merit on Israel's part but for the sake of his own name (20:44).

This answer, as we have said, is already implicit in Ezekiel's rendering of history. The reason for the focus on the generations around the Exodus rather than the generation of the patriarchs or those during the occupation of the land now becomes clear. There is an analogy to be drawn between the Exodus/desert generation and his own. The present position of the exilic generation in the six-part cycle of sin and judgment is (6): Israel's rebellion has led to a limited judgment on the Lord's part—specifically, the scattering among the nations, mentioned in 20:23. But as the three-generation cycle makes clear, (6) can never be the end of the story! God's people cannot be destroyed completely, not because they do not deserve it but because God has staked the reputation of his own name on the covenant promises made to them. He may and indeed does chastise them and judge them, but he can never abandon them utterly. His divine nature requires faithfulness to his promise, even in the face of unrelenting human sin (cf. Hos. 11:8–11).

Therefore, there must necessarily be a new act of salvation on God's part, a new exodus. Israel cannot be abandoned to "be like the nations, like the peoples of the world, who serve wood and stone," as the elders had thought (Ezek. 20:32)! Whether that thought is one of desire ("We want to be like the nations . . .")¹⁴ or of despair ("We are become like the nations . . .")¹⁵ is not really the issue; rather, the focus is on the impossibility of such a thing happening for God has staked his reputation on them (cf. 36:22–23).

Divine election cannot be revoked; the Lord will reign over them (Ezek. 20:33). The echoes of 1 Samuel 8 are not coincidental. There, too, the people had sought to become "such as all the other nations" by having a king (8:5), which is interpreted as a rejection of the Lord's reign over them (8:7). They are warned of the real consequences of their choice (8:11–18), yet ultimately their election is not revocable. They do not, indeed cannot, become like the nations around them: instead, even their rebellious wish for a monarchy is subsumed in the providence of God. The Lord himself gives them the kings of his own choosing, good and bad, to prepare the way for the coming of the King of kings.

Similarly, the message of God's kingship exercised in a new exodus is not necessarily good news. Yes, his reign comes with a mighty hand and outstretched arm, as in the first exodus (Deut. 4:34 and frequently); yes, he will bring them out of the nations and gather them just as he once brought them out of Egypt (Ezek. 20:34). But in addition, his reign comes with outpoured wrath. Just as the unfaithful Israelites were brought up out of Egypt only to die in the desert, so too the regathered Israel will be purged in the "desert of the nations" (20:35). There God will meet with his people "face to face," just as he met with Moses "face to face" in the tent of meeting (Ex. 33:11).

But this face-to-face meeting will not be that of two friends, as it was with Moses, but rather a meeting of personal judgment. The use of the Niphal of *šāpaṭ* underlines the legal nature of this encounter. ¹⁶ God will go to court against the rebels among his people, singling out the transgressors from the faithful just as a shepherd counts and separates his sheep by passing them one by one under his rod (Ezek. 20:37).

The application to the present generation comes in 20:39. The choice is, in one sense, theirs to make. They may go and serve their idols, if they wish. But they must remember this: that God's purpose in the election of Israel will stand. A time is coming when in place of the profane worship offered on every high hill and under every leafy tree there will be pure worship offered in the one true place, God's holy mountain, the high mountain of Israel (20:40).

This looks forward in seed form to the full description of the renewed Israel at worship on a high mountain in chapters 40–48. The positive result of the new exodus will be pure worship offered by a purified people, in whom the Lord's holiness is publicly displayed to the eyes of the nations. There the oath made in Egypt (20:5) will be fulfilled (20:42), and there the remnant who survived the desert judgment—not on merit but by grace—will appreciate the immensity of their own sin and the faithfulness of God to his covenant promises (20:44). The future for Israel depends entirely on God and his commitment to his Word. But those who refuse to trust God to fulfill his promises and instead have turned their backs on him will never enter the new Promised Land.

Bridging Contexts

Contemporary choices. In a world of disposable relationships, it is hard for us to grasp the meaning of a covenant bond. We live increasingly in a culture where people change spouses like former generations used to trade in their cars—whenever they start making noises we don't care for, or after three to five years, whichever comes sooner. As a culture, we tend to make and break friendships frequently, as we or our friends move on to new places or as we grow apart from one another. As a culture, we are inclined to abandon the older generation to nursing homes when they become too much of a burden to us. The idea of sticking with a long-term relationship through thick and thin is, if not yet utterly foreign to our experience, at least becoming a rarity. We are, after all, the consumer generation; we tend to view people as products—commodities to be used as long as they meet our needs and fulfill our desires, but always likely to become obsolete or superseded by a "new and improved" product.¹⁷

This attitude has filtered through into our understanding of religion. Thus, we do not have a lifetime commitment to one church or even to one denomination, but change our churches whenever we find one that better meets our needs. According to George Barna, in the near future "people will no longer have a single church home but multiple church homes. On any given Sunday they will wake up and choose a particular church which they feel will meet the needs they feel most keenly that morning."¹⁸

This attitude holds true not merely of one's choice of church but across religions as well. Perhaps as never before people are "choosing their religion," not on the basis of whether the religion is "true" or "false" but whether that particular religious perspective "works for them." In the marketplace of religious ideas, all perspectives are regarded as being equally valid; may the best marketer win!¹⁹

The one nonnegotiable in this process, from a contemporary perspective, is personal choice.²⁰ As the bumper sticker expounds it: "Attend the church or synagogue of your choice this week!" Which church or synagogue most fully expounds the truth about God is apparently not an issue; for many, it is not even a relevant question. The important factor is that this is the religion and church that you have chosen.

Not our choice but the Lord's. It is hard to imagine a viewpoint more radically different from that of Ezekiel 20. For Ezekiel, what is definitive is not Israel's choice but the Lord's choice. Israel in the past had frequently, even invariably, chosen wrongly. "Attending the church or synagogue of their choice" had led to worshiping idols in Egypt and the pagan gods and goddesses in the land of Canaan. Such idolatrous worship frequently had the marketing edge on true worship. People voted with their feet in favor of the false rather than the true. Yet even though the people were unfaithful, God remained faithful to his covenant promises and his own character. God could not walk away from Israel like a manufacturer who simply discontinues an unprofitable or defect-prone line and retools a product to meet the demand of changing times.

The one nonnegotiable for Ezekiel, therefore, is God's choice: Israel's "choice" only occurs in the context of their prior chosenness as the covenant community. They can choose to fulfill their calling, to be a blessing and so to receive life. Or they can choose to rebel against that calling, seeking to be free of that chosenness like the nations around them, and face the consequences. If they choose to be like the nations, by God himself (note the oath formula of 20:33) there will be hell to pay. God's judgment will certainly fall on those who choose the false worship over the true. The salvific event of a new exodus will bring nothing but judgment for them, just as the first exodus led to judgment in the desert for a whole generation. Yet, in spite of that, God's salvation purposes are unshakable: He will establish his chosen ones not in the "church of their choice" but in the holy mountain of his choosing, the new city of God (20:40).²¹

Contemporary Significance

THE WORLD REVOLVES around God. John Corrie identifies the following trends as typical of postmodern culture:

It is a culture characterized by freedom of choice in which we are invited to "pick'n'mix" our own philosophy of life. Furthermore . . . it is hedonistic and materialistic; it generates a breakdown of respect for authority, confusion on moral absolutes and a fierce

individualism which destroys community values. It is a culture in search of meaning, significance and purpose, since it breaks down any unified sense of reality, creating anonymity and atomization.²²

Ezekiel has some hard words for such a generation that has institutionalized and glorified rebellion under the banner of "choice." It summons a people who think that the world revolves around themselves to a Copernican change in their thought: We are called to accept the truth that the world rather revolves around God.

But what are the implications for us, who are called to proclaim the gospel in this culture? We need to remind people that what matters is not what we think about God but what he thinks of us.²³ I once met a woman who told me that she kept a Bible and literature from Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses alongside her child's bed so that when he grew up he could choose for himself what to believe. Such a view is frequently regarded as highly enlightened in our day and age, where everything is tolerated except intolerance.²⁴ Ezekiel would not have been greatly surprised by such a view, for already in his day people sought to match the "enlightened attitudes" of those around them. He has another word for it than broad-mindedness, though: For him, it is rebellion against the one true and living God.

The true nature of rebellion. Rebellion is never simply against an abstract conception of God, however, but against the personal God of grace. Satan always seeks to persuade us, as he did our first parents, that God is a harsh taskmaster who will exploit us and abuse us if we allow him, and that he seeks to deny us things that are good (Gen. 3:1).²⁵ The reality is exactly the opposite, for them and for us. God had made a perfect world for Adam and Eve to live in and placed them in the most perfect spot within it, a paradise. Their area of personal freedom was large; the restriction minuscule. Yet being deceived into reading that minuscule restriction as bondage, they gave in to Satan's temptation, only to discover too late what true bondage was.

Similarly, God came to Israel in the midst of their miserable bondage and offered them the way to the total freedom of pure worship. He promised them not just any land but a beautiful land for their own (Ezek. 20:6). Only

the very best would do for God's people. They, however, sought only half-freedom. They wanted freedom from the unpleasant circumstances of their sin and from its messy complications, but not freedom from the sin itself. They would rather keep their idols and perish in the desert than enter the Promised Land without them.

So also in our day many seek meaning, significance, and purpose—but only on their own terms. Spirituality is a growth market. We are surrounded by a generation of seekers, who assume that God can be found whenever and wherever they choose to seek him. For them, "seeking" is another word for "shopping." But, as the elders discovered, God is not a cosmic merchandiser, for whom "the customer is always right." It is possible, indeed inevitable, that the determinedly open-minded seeker will not find an answer from Israel's God.

A downward spiral. What is more, left to itself rebellion naturally heads into a downward spiral. From Adam to Cain is only one generation, but in that time we move from humankind having to be talked into sin by Satan (Gen. 3:1) to humankind unwilling to be talked out of sin by God (4:6–7). By the time we arrive at Lamech, seven generations from Adam, we have already reached the poetic glorification of gratuitous violence, a kind of primeval version of "gangsta rap" (4:23–24). Not even the cosmic judgment of the Flood can reverse the downward trend of sin.

So too for Israel. As the generations pass, Israel's idolatry goes from bad to worse, moving from idolatry in Egypt and disobedience to God's lifegiving law in the desert, to culminate in perverse obedience to laws and statutes that lead to death, even to the sacrifice of their firstborn children. What then shall we say of our own era, in which idolatry is not so much tolerated as celebrated? The cover of a New Age mail order catalog declares as their slogan, "Live fully; laugh often; love all ways; look within." The biblical command to love always (Eph. 5:2) is now enculturated as the injunction to "love all ways."

But at the same time as our society embraces a tolerance that freely encompasses even the intolerable, we also see the growth of death-giving statutes. The idea of euthanasia is finding growing acceptance in this country, as in many others around the world.²⁷ At present, it operates around the fringes of legality, but its supporters continue to press for legal recognition. We too have adopted our own form of child sacrifice,

slaughtering countless unborn babies on the altars of the secular gods of convenience and comfort, of reputation and respectability.²⁸

We find ourselves today, then, perhaps more clearly than our parents did, in the midst of a society that is in headlong rebellion against God and is reaping the fruits of that rebellion in seared consciences and irrationally self-destructive behaviors. We live in the midst of a society of adults and children suffering the traumatic effects of broken relationships, in some cases ending up in alcohol and drug addiction as a means of deadening the pain of their deep sense of rejection and alienation. Others have buried themselves in their work and career, seeking some kind of significance for their lives. Thus far Ezekiel's words address us clearly.

Implications of rebellion for contemporary society. What, then, are the implications of Ezekiel 20 for such a generation? Two things come across clearly in this chapter. (1) On the one hand, rebellion will inevitably be punished. Israel can never simply choose to be like the nations and thus remove herself from God's authority. There are only two choices for Israel: She can choose to accept her election and live on the basis of God's laws, or she can rebel as she has so often before and face the consequences of certain death. Likewise, our generation needs people within the covenant community who are prophetically willing to call a spade a spade, to call sin sin, to speak of death and hell and the judgment to come. We need to confront the socially acceptable idols of comfort and success and career progress, which many in our churches attempt to combine with a commitment to Christ, as well as the more blatantly pagan idolatries.

We need to confront in our own hearts the continual temptation to remake our understanding of God into a comfortable reflection of our own image instead of submitting unreservedly to his self-revelation in Scripture. It is not a comfortable message to proclaim in an age that calls idols of wood and stone "different paths to God" and the high places "the church of your choice." But God has not changed and the reality of his wrath must be recognized. Otherwise, we are simply deceiving ourselves and those around us with lies about God.

(2) On the other hand, Ezekiel 20 should also fill Christians with profound optimism. For it asserts that, come hell or high water, with or without the help of his church, God's kingdom will come. His purposes in election are so sure that not even Israel's continual history of sin can thwart

them. Though in the providence of God his first exodus did not bring to fruition his purpose of a pure, worshiping people, the second exodus will.

What, however, is this second exodus of which Ezekiel speaks? In some postexilic literature the return to Judah under Cyrus is portrayed as a second exodus, ²⁹ yet the tone of partial fulfillment predominates in these books. Those who participated in the return were well aware of how far short it fell of the extravagant language of the prophets. It is more of a first stage in the second exodus that the exodus itself. Not until Jesus comes proclaiming the good news of liberation does the exodus start in earnest (Luke 4:18–19). Yet, as Ezekiel makes clear, the goal of the second exodus, like that of the first exodus, is not simply liberation. This is the problem with much liberation theology. Though the exodus from Egypt is proclaimed as the paradigm, ³⁰ the goal of that exodus is lost from view. The people are redeemed and purified from Babylon and Egypt so that they can worship. The goal of exodus, indeed of all salvation, is a purified people worshiping the one true God.

Ezekiel describes that pure worship in typical Old Testament terms: sacrifices offered in a restored temple. But even though at the return to the land the temple was rebuilt and sacrifices were offered, something was still missing. The fulfillment of Ezekiel's worship, as for all Old Testament worship, is found in Jesus Christ, who affirmed to the woman of Samaria a new era of worship. In this new era, people will worship neither on Mount Gerizim nor in Jerusalem, nor even on Ezekiel's high mountain, but in spirit and in truth. With the coming of Jesus, as the mediator of the new covenant, the true "new age" of worship has dawned, the age of the worship of the redeemed community in the presence of God himself (Heb. 12:22–24).

Ezekiel 20:45–21:32

The word of the LORD came to me: ⁴⁶"Son of man, set your face toward the south; preach against the south and prophesy against the forest of the southland. ⁴⁷Say to the southern forest: 'Hear the word of the LORD. This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am about to set fire to you, and it will consume all your trees, both green and dry. The blazing flame will not be quenched, and every face from south to north will be scorched by it. ⁴⁸Everyone will see that I the LORD have kindled it; it will not be quenched.'"

⁴⁹Then I said, "Ah, Sovereign LORD! They are saying of me, 'Isn't he just telling parables?'"

^{21:1}The word of the LORD came to me: ²"Son of man, set your face against Jerusalem and preach against the sanctuary. Prophesy against the land of Israel ³and say to her: 'This is what the LORD says: I am against you. I will draw my sword from its scabbard and cut off from you both the righteous and the wicked. ⁴Because I am going to cut off the righteous and the wicked, my sword will be unsheathed against everyone from south to north. ⁵Then all people will know that I the LORD have drawn my sword from its scabbard; it will not return again.'

6"Therefore groan, son of man! Groan before them with broken heart and bitter grief. ⁷And when they ask you, 'Why are you groaning?' you shall say, 'Because of the news that is coming. Every heart will melt and every hand go limp; every spirit will become faint and every knee become as weak as water.' It is coming! It will surely take place, declares the Sovereign LORD."

⁸The word of the LORD came to me: ⁹"Son of man, prophesy and say, 'This is what the Lord says:

" 'A sword, a sword, sharpened and polished— ¹⁰sharpened for the slaughter, polished to flash like lightning!

"'Shall we rejoice in the scepter of my son LJudah...? The sword despises every such stick.

11" 'The sword is appointed to be polished, to be grasped with the hand; it is sharpened and polished, made ready for the hand of the slayer.
12Cry out and wail, son of man, for it is against my people; it is against all the princes of Israel.
They are thrown to the sword along with my people.
Therefore beat your breast.

13" 'Testing will surely come. And what if the scepter Lof Judah, which the sword despises, does not continue? declares the Sovereign LORD.'

14"So then, son of man, prophesy and strike your hands together.
Let the sword strike twice, even three times.
It is a sword for slaughter—

a sword for great slaughter,
closing in on them from every side.

15So that hearts may melt and the fallen be many,
I have stationed the sword for slaughter at all their gates.

Oh! It is made to flash like lightning, it is grasped for slaughter.

16O sword, slash to the right, then to the left, wherever your blade is turned.

17I too will strike my hands together, and my wrath will subside.

I the LORD have spoken."

¹⁸The word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁹"Son of man, mark out two roads for the sword of the king of Babylon to take, both starting from the same country. Make a signpost where the road branches off to the city. ²⁰Mark out one road for the sword to come against Rabbah of the Ammonites and another against Judah and fortified Jerusalem. ²¹For the king of Babylon will stop at the fork in the road, at the junction of the two roads, to seek an omen: He will cast lots with arrows, he will consult his idols, he will examine the liver. ²²Into his right hand will come the lot for Jerusalem, where he is to set up battering rams, to give the command to slaughter, to sound the battle cry, to set battering rams against the gates, to build a ramp and to erect siege works. ²³It will seem like a false omen to those who have sworn allegiance to him, but he will remind them of their guilt and take them captive.

24"Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: 'Because you people have brought to mind your guilt by your open rebellion, revealing your sins in all that you do—because you have done this, you will be taken captive.

²⁵" 'O profane and wicked prince of Israel, whose day has come, whose time of punishment has reached its climax, ²⁶this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Take off the turban, remove the crown.

It will not be as it was: The lowly will be exalted and the exalted will be brought low. ²⁷A ruin! A ruin! I will make it a ruin! It will not be restored until he comes to whom it rightfully belongs; to him I will give it.'

²⁸"And you, son of man, prophesy and say, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says about the Ammonites and their insults:

"'A sword, a sword, drawn for the slaughter, polished to consume and to flash like lightning!

29 Despite false visions concerning you and lying divinations about you, it will be laid on the necks of the wicked who are to be slain, whose day has come, whose time of punishment has reached its climax.

³⁰Return the sword to its scabbard. In the place where you were created, in the land of your ancestry, I will judge you.

31 I will pour out my wrath upon you and breathe out my fiery anger against you;
 I will hand you over to brutal men, men skilled in destruction.

32You will be fuel for the fire, your blood will be shed in your land, you will be remembered no more; for I the LORD have spoken."

Original Meaning

This section of Ezekiel's prophecy, all one chapter in the Hebrew versification, divides up into four subsections:

- (1) A parable and its interpretation (20:45–21:7)
- (2) The song of the sword (21:8–17)
- (3) An oracle of judgment against Jerusalem and her prince (21:18–27)
- (4) An oracle of judgment against Ammon and against the sword (21:28–32)

The common theme that binds these sections together is the catchword "sword" as an image of God's judgment, which together with the associated image of fire, falls first on God's people, then on the not-so-innocent bystanders, and finally on the agent of judgment, the Babylonians.

The passage begins with the command to Ezekiel to face toward the south of Israel and preach against it (20:46); fire is coming on the southern forest, which will consume every tree, "both green and dry" (20:47). The conflagration will consume the entire land from south to north and scorch the faces of all who are present. It will be publicly recognized as the work of the Lord and will not be extinguished (20:48). But the people's response to this message is apparently total lack of comprehension: They say of Ezekiel, "Isn't he just telling parables?" (20:49).

Like all parables, this one both conceals and reveals. Some things are immediately clear from the parable, for it concerns an all-consuming judgment of the Lord. The judgment is all-consuming in its *content*, both green tree (i.e., not normally suitable for burning) and dry (i.e., naturally fit for the fire); in its *geographical scope* (from the south northwards); and in its *temporal scope* (it has been kindled and will not be extinguished). Yet the precise focus of the parable is not immediately clear: Who is the "southern forest" (20:47)? Without that critical piece of information, the parable remains an obscure riddle.

That information is supplied in the interpretation that follows: The three Hebrew terms for "south" in the parable ($t\hat{e}m\bar{a}n; d\bar{a}r\hat{o}m; negeb$) are matched by three objects of judgment: Jerusalem, the sanctuary,² and the land of Israel (21:2). With that identification in place, other elements of the parable

are put into sharper focus. Israel is the southland from the perspective of the traditional "enemy from the north," a motif introduced already in 1:4. The image of fire is linked with that of the sword of the Lord, which is coming against the land to cut off both righteous (the green tree) and wicked (the dry tree), from the south to the north of the land. The sword has been drawn from its scabbard and will not return there.

The focus of the interpretation, like that of the parable, is the all-encompassing nature of the coming judgment. "Righteous" and "wicked," like "green tree" and "dry tree," operate together as a merism, a pair of opposites that includes everything in between. These two are not, however, a randomly chosen pair, which could be replaced by another stock pairing such as "young" and "old." If the judgment includes even the *righteous*, whom one would expect normally to be spared (9:4), then indeed no one will escape. The coming judgment on Jerusalem will not be selective and short-lived, as was the invasion of 597 B.C., but all-encompassing and all-consuming. Nor is there any hope of a reprieve: The fire is kindled; the sword is drawn; there is only the fearful expectation of judgment.

To underline that fearful certainty, Ezekiel is instructed to perform a signact of publicly sighing and groaning with a broken spirit (21:6). When people ask him why he is sighing, he is to respond with a somewhat cryptic statement: "Because of the news that is coming. Every heart will melt and every hand go limp; every spirit will become faint and every knee become as weak as water" (21:7). What event has come that merits such a response? Ezekiel's hearers would have to think back to Ezekiel 7, where the final judgment was threatened in virtually identical language. The threatened judgment is now a present reality.

The prophet then receives a poetic oracle concerning the sword.⁶ The twin judgment images of cutting (the sword) and burning (the fire) are maintained in the twin actions of sharpening and burnishing (note the connection between polishing and lightning in 21:10, 15). Together, these actions serve to prepare the weapon for action. Once prepared, the sword is handed over to the executioner to use against God's people and the princes of Israel. Ezekiel is to strike his hands together in a threatening gesture,⁷ not once or twice but three times, symbolizing the totality of the judgment (21:14). Israel will be surrounded, hemmed in on all sides with no place to run and no place to hide (21:14–16). The prophet's threatening gesture is

merely a public display of the Lord's own threatening gesture and determination to satisfy his wrath⁸ in his decimation of the people.

Thus far "the sword" of the Lord has been an entirely figurative image of divine judgment. In 21:18–27, however, we are introduced to the human agency that executes the divine will, the sword of the king of Babylon. The prophet is instructed to perform another sign-act, this time marking out a three-way road junction with a signpost. One way comes from Babylon; the other two go to Rabbah, the capital of the Ammonites, and to Jerusalem, the capital of Judah. Ezekiel is to act out the forces of the king of Babylon coming to this parting of the ways and deciding which route to follow. To which of those two rebellious cities should they go?

Ezekiel pictures the king utilizing all the pagan means of decision-making: drawing arrows from a quiver (somewhat akin to our practice of drawing straws), consulting the household gods, and examining the liver of a sacrificial animal (Ezek. 21:21). These three means belong properly to different cultural contexts: divination by arrows was typically Arabian (though see 2 Kings 13:15–19), consulting household gods was known in an Israelite context (Hos. 3:4), while the examination of livers was a Babylonian specialty. It may be that Nebuchadnezzar actually used such diverse practices; however, given the prominence of the number three as representative of completeness in this section, it is perhaps more likely that the multiplication of oracles represents comprehensive consultation of the gods. Where three separate oracles agree on a single course of action, is not divine approval sure?

The irony is that this use of pagan means of discerning the will of the gods is here an accurate discernment of the will of the true God. The "lying divinations" that had found such favor with God's people (Ezek. 13:7) now become the very means through which judgment comes on them (21:23). Their broken oath to the Lord is punished by the one with whom they have broken a human covenant. In this way, the king of Babylon is acting as divine prosecution counsel (*mazkîr*)," bringing out into the open Israel's guilt and arresting them for it. As in a court of law, the point is not so much that the guilty party is "reminded" of their sins, as the NIV suggests, but rather that they are made public and therefore subject to the punishment they deserve (21:24).

That punishment falls not only on the people but also upon Zedekiah, rather dismissively addressed as "O profane and wicked prince." By introducing him by that title rather than by name, Ezekiel puts the focus of the judgment on the office, not the person.¹³ It is not simply that Zedekiah will be stripped of the insignia of royalty, the turban and the crown (21:26), but that in him the old order of things has reached a conclusion. A divine reordering of society is called for, in which the Lord will exalt the lowly and bring down the exalted (21:26; cf. 17:24).¹⁴ His guilt (' ^awōn) is complete; so, with a fittingness that the Hebrew pun brings out, he will be made completely a "ruin" ('awwâ, repeated three times).

This ruinous state will persist until the coming of him to whom judgment (mišpāṭ) belongs, to whom it has been assigned by the Lord. In traditional exegesis, this has been seen as a reference to the coming of the Messiah, the one to whom the "right" (mišpāṭ) of kingship belongs. However, since in Ezek. 23:24b nātattî mišpāṭ refers to the Lord's handing over judgment to the Babylonians, the traditional exegesis seems unlikely. Rather, it seems that Ezekiel has reshaped the traditional messianic oracle of Genesis 49:10 into a threatening oracle of judgment. Now the scepter will not depart from Judah until the coming of the judge . . . Nebuchadnezzar!

Yet precisely this method of framing the judgment oracle reminds us of the Judge behind the judge, the Coming One behind the coming one. Heathen Nebuchadnezzar may be God's chosen instrument of judgment in Ezekiel 21, just as heathen Cyrus may be God's "anointed," his chosen instrument of salvation, in Isaiah 45. Yet the dominant reality in both cases is the plan and purpose of God. God's promise to Judah in Genesis 49 is not retracted in Ezekiel 21, though it may be reshaped because of the sin of God's people. The departure of the scepter may be necessary and appropriate because of the history of sin of the "princes of Israel," which culminates in Zedekiah; yet its departure can only be temporary, because the defining reality is God's election, not humanity's sin.

Judgment is not limited to Judah, however. The (pagan) oracle that directed Nebuchadnezzar toward Jerusalem is more a stay of execution for Ammon than a reprieve. They too, like Zedekiah, are among the profane wicked whose time of punishment has come (cf. 21:29 with 21:25). Therefore they too will feel the cutting edge of the sword of God's judgment. As the initial parable made clear, God's judgment is

comprehensive in scope. Indeed, that judgment will eventually include the sword itself. The sword that was drawn from the Lord's scabbard, "not [to] return again" in 21:5, will at last be returned to its sheath in 21:30. There, in the place where it was created, it will be judged (21:30).

Babylon is neither above God nor independent of God in its furious power. Rather, it is merely his creation, a tool to be taken up and used for his purposes and then put down when its usefulness is over. What the Lord has lifted up, the Lord can also reduce once more to nothing. In that way it will become clear that it is the Lord who has raised her up and put her down, not any supposed power of her own gods.

Bridging Contexts

FIRE AND SWORD. The images of fire and sword for God's judgment have a venerable history. They come together already in Genesis 3:24, where the cherubim assigned to guard the entrance to Eden are accompanied by a flaming sword. The flashing sword is God's instrument of judgment on his enemies in Deuteronomy 32:41; his sword is poised against Assyria (Isa. 31:8) and Edom (34:5–6), and the angel of the Lord appears to Joshua with a drawn sword before the battle of Jericho (Josh. 5:13).

But the Lord can fight against his people as well as for them. In 1 Chronicles 21:16 the angel is poised with drawn sword over Jerusalem rather than an enemy city, while Jeremiah prophesies the coming of the sword of the Lord against the whole land from one end to the other (Jer. 12:12). Equally, the Lord's fire continually threatens his unholy people: It burns up those who rebel against him in the desert (Num. 11:1; 16:35) and hangs over the head of their unholy descendants (Jer. 15:14; 17:4).

In no instance, however, is either the sword or fire an entity with a mind of its own. Even when they are figurative representations of human agencies of destruction, they operate entirely within the realm of God's sovereignty as agents of his judgment. He kindles the fire and brings the sword down on his enemies in his wrath. Nor is that simply an Old Testament concept of God. In fact, Jesus describes his ministry on earth in precisely those terms. He came not "to bring peace to the earth . . . but a sword" (Matt. 10:34). In the parallel passage in Luke's Gospel, the sword is replaced by fire as Jesus exclaims: "I have come to bring fire on the earth,

and how I wish it were already kindled!" (Luke 12:49). His mission is one of executing God's judgment on earth.

This indeed was what the Old Testament prophesied: Malachi spoke of the appearance of the Lord like a refiner's fire or launderer's soap (Mal. 3:1–2). But if Jesus has come to bring about judgment, how can any survive? Will his judgment not be as comprehensive as that which Ezekiel described, leading to the total destruction of all flesh?

Surviving the refiner's fire. How can the refiner's fire of God's wrath pass over us and not burn us alive? The answer is because it has already passed over Jesus and poured its heat out on him. How can the avenging sword of the Lord pass by us without destroying us? Because it was sheathed in the body of Jesus on the cross so that it cannot further harm his people. God has raised his sword of judgment and brought it down on the shepherd in place of the sheep (Zech. 13:7). His death in our place makes it possible for us to come close to the avenging God of justice and not be destroyed by him. Through Jesus, a safe way has been made for us to approach God, whereby the fire of God's wrath is transformed into the refiner's fire, which purifies and tests but does not destroy (13:9). Because of him, we may return to God and find him coming near to us also.

That is not to say that we do not experience the testing work of God's fire as believers. We do. The quality of all of our work will be tested by that medium, which will expose its true nature (1 Cor. 3:13). If we have built with lasting materials upon the only foundation of our lives as Christians, the finished work of Christ, there will be rewards stored up for us. But if we have built only with shoddy, temporary materials, all that we have labored for on earth will be destroyed. The prospect of the fire to come is a sobering challenge to the believer to examine whether he or she is building suitably for the test. Yet even that believer who has built the least-enduring structure on the foundation of Christ will not be destroyed by the testing fire (1 Cor. 3:15). Though his or her work may count for nothing, he or she will still be saved because the destructive power of the fire has all been absorbed by Jesus.

But that safety is only for those for whom Christ died. Those outside Christ are left exposed to the full weight of the crushing, piercing, burning wrath of God. The fire of God's anger against sin has not been extinguished, nor has the sword of his wrath been blunted. There are no innocent bystanders; none will excuse their actions by reference to God's sovereignty. A day is established for God's final and complete judgment of all flesh, when Jesus Christ will ride forth to battle with a sharp sword, treading the winepress of the fury of God's wrath (Rev. 19:15). He will make war on all the forces that oppose God and anyone whose name has not been written in the book of life will be thrown into the lake of fire (20:14–15).

Imagery and propositional statements. The Bible is a book filled with images and imagery. God delivers his message not in the cold tones of propositional statements (although we may certainly deduce from the Bible propositions about who God is and what he is like) but in a welter of pictures. Supremely, his self-communication takes the form of the visible enactments of the prophets and most particularly of the final prophet, Jesus Christ, the Word become flesh.

Ironically, however, much expository preaching, which seeks to faithfully deliver the message of the Bible, begins by abstracting the proposition (the so-called "big idea of the passage") from its surrounding imagery. That imagery is then tossed away like so much used wrapping paper, while the "big idea" is repackaged in an entirely new format for its delivery to the contemporary congregation. Could that be one reason why people find so much of our preaching boring? We have lost the vivid directness of the fire-filled Word of God, replacing it by the cool logical flow of classical rhetoric. If we wish to regain the power of the original proclamation, we would do well to consider more fully how we can deliver messages about fires that burn and words about the sword that cut to the heart.¹⁹

Contemporary Significance

THE QUESTION OF JUSTICE. One of the biggest questions in contemporary society is the question of justice. Where is the God of justice in our modern world? When children are gunned down on our streets in drive-by shootings, what is God doing about it? Where is God in Bosnia and Rwanda, in the midst of ethnic cleansing and tribal genocide? Deep in their hearts, people are outraged by the lack of justice in this world. Instinctively, they long for justice to reign and have an innate desire to see strong action against the wicked, with right triumphing and evil defeated. Isn't that why

virtually every politician is on the side of law and order? Isn't that why there is a whole genre of popular vigilante movies, in which a strong individual establishes justice and peace by shooting, stabbing, or otherwise disposing of a formidable array of bad guys?

But if a standard of complete justice were actually to be imposed, each of us would face a very real problem: The justice for which we say we long would condemn each one of us as transgressors. Far from saving us, Superman would be implacably opposed to our way of life. All would stand condemned and guilty; all would face the fearful prospect of immediate and complete reckoning, with the Man of Steel dedicated to putting us out of circulation.

Imagine yourself as the villain rather than as the innocent bystander in the vigilante movie, and you begin to understand the horror of Judah's situation. They stood condemned as guilty, and now the prophet declared the onset of immediate and complete judgment at the hands of the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar. Nor was it simply the might of Babylon that was dedicated to crushing the life out of them. The sword of the Lord himself was raised against them; the fire of his wrath had been kindled and would not be extinguished. What a fearful prospect! This is Jerusalem's *Nightmare on Elm Street*, with the Lord himself playing the part of Freddy Krueger.

The fire of eternal punishment. Yet is the situation of modern men and women who are without Christ any more secure? Not at all! Unless they hear the gospel and trust in the death of Christ on the cross, turning from their sins, they face the eternal prospect of the fire and the sword, God's wrath poured out on them. They are, to use the language of Jonathan Edwards, "sinners in the hands of an angry God," suspended over the pit of eternity by a narrow thread of life, in perpetual danger of falling to eternal destruction.

The destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. was terribly comprehensive when God handed over judgment to the sword of Babylon. However, it was merely a sideshow when compared to the comprehensive judgment of the world that awaits the coming of the one to whom judgment belongs. God's wrath is aroused at the rebellious thoughts, deeds, and words of those whom he has created. When the Judge of all the earth comes to settle final accounts, the sword will fall on uncleansed sinners, to their eternal doom.

The doctrine of eternal torment in hell is not popular these days. In fact, it probably never has been, even in the heyday of Puritan preaching. In the modern world in particular, however, it is rarely the topic of sermons. Far more often, it is the subject of attempts to present the biblical teaching in a kinder, gentler light. As John Gerstner so aptly put it: "Modern theology has tended to take either the pain out of eternity or the eternity out of pain." Like the erstwhile inhabitants of Jerusalem, we are convinced that the Judge will choose the other road and we will be spared. We don't really believe that the Bible's teaching on eternal punishment should be taken literally, at least not with reference to ourselves. But it is precisely with reference to ourselves that we should consider this doctrine. As C. S. Lewis reminds us:

In all our discussions of Hell we should keep steadily before our eyes the possible damnation, not of our enemies nor of our friends (since both these disturb the reason) but of ourselves. This [doctrine] is not about your wife or son, nor about Nero or Judas Iscariot; it is about you and me.²¹

The fire of purification. What then are we to do? Is there any hope that we can survive his coming? Is there any future for you and me? The answer, incredibly, is yes. Yes! The fire will descend with purifying power as well as destructive force. Yes, the sword will cut away impurity as well as cut off the impure. A remnant, a purified remnant, will emerge, refined like gold and silver, ready to serve the Lord in righteousness.

So what is the answer to the problem of evil and injustice in this world? On one level, there is no answer. God does not give us information simply to satisfy our philosophical questions. What he does do is to bring the question home personally to each person: What is the answer to *your* evil and lack of justice? The Christian's answer is to point to the cross: there, once and for all time, the eternal wrath of God that I deserved was poured out completely on Jesus Christ, God's only Son. In that act is God's final answer to the problem of my evil: The Son of God was bruised for my transgression and broken for my iniquity. Because of that death, and only because of that death, I can look forward without fear to the coming again

of the heavenly Judge to judge all nations of the earth with righteousness and truth.

But lack of fear of the coming of the fire and the sword does not mean that we can sit back and relax. Our works will be tested by fire as believers, and much of what we spend our time on is far from fireproof. We fill our lives with the trivial, passing our time instead of spending it, living alongside people aimlessly instead of living with them purposefully. Even those closest to us may hardly ever be affected by the ideas that we claim are closest to our hearts. Instead of burning out for God, we are heaping up empty actions for God's grand bonfire. From the perspective of eternity, how wasted will so much of our lives seem to have been?

Ezekiel 22

The word of the LORD came to me: ²"Son of man, will you judge her? Will you judge this city of bloodshed? Then confront her with all her detestable practices ³and say: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O city that brings on herself doom by shedding blood in her midst and defiles herself by making idols, ⁴you have become guilty because of the blood you have shed and have become defiled by the idols you have made. You have brought your days to a close, and the end of your years has come. Therefore I will make you an object of scorn to the nations and a laughingstock to all the countries. ⁵Those who are near and those who are far away will mock you, O infamous city, full of turmoil.

6" 'See how each of the princes of Israel who are in you uses his power to shed blood. ⁷In you they have treated father and mother with contempt; in you they have oppressed the alien and mistreated the fatherless and the widow. ⁸You have despised my holy things and desecrated my Sabbaths. 9In you are slanderous men bent on shedding blood; in you are those who eat at the mountain shrines and commit lewd acts. ¹⁰In you are those who dishonor their fathers' bed; in you are those who violate women during their period, when they are ceremonially unclean. ¹¹In you one man commits a detestable offense with his neighbor's wife, another shamefully defiles his daughter-in-law, and another violates his sister, his own father's daughter. ¹²In you men accept bribes to shed blood; you take usury and excessive interest and make unjust gain from your

neighbors by extortion. And you have forgotten me, declares the Sovereign LORD.

13" 'I will surely strike my hands together at the unjust gain you have made and at the blood you have shed in your midst. ¹⁴Will your courage endure or your hands be strong in the day I deal with you? I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it. ¹⁵I will disperse you among the nations and scatter you through the countries; and I will put an end to your uncleanness. ¹⁶When you have been defiled in the eyes of the nations, you will know that I am the LORD.'"

of man, the house of Israel has become dross to me; all of them are the copper, tin, iron and lead left inside a furnace. They are but the dross of silver.

19 Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: 'Because you have all become dross, I will gather you into Jerusalem.

20 As men gather silver, copper, iron, lead and tin into a furnace to melt it with a fiery blast, so will I gather you in my anger and my wrath and put you inside the city and melt you.

21 I will gather you and I will blow on you with my fiery wrath, and you will be melted inside her.

22 As silver is melted in a furnace, so you will be melted inside her, and you will know that I the LORD have poured out my wrath upon you.'"

²³Again the word of the LORD came to me:

²⁴"Son of man, say to the land, 'You are a land that has had no rain or showers in the day of wrath.'

²⁵There is a conspiracy of her princes within her like a roaring lion tearing its prey; they devour people, take treasures and precious things and make many widows within her. ²⁶Her priests do violence to my law and profane my holy things; they do not distinguish between the holy and the common; they

teach that there is no difference between the unclean and the clean; and they shut their eyes to the keeping of my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them. ²⁷Her officials within her are like wolves tearing their prey; they shed blood and kill people to make unjust gain. ²⁸Her prophets whitewash these deeds for them by false visions and lying divinations. They say, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says'—when the LORD has not spoken. ²⁹The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the alien, denying them justice.

³⁰"I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none. ³¹So I will pour out my wrath on them and consume them with my fiery anger, bringing down on their own heads all they have done, declares the Sovereign LORD."

Original Meaning

THE IDEA OF comprehensive judgment descending on God's people was already present in Ezekiel 21, but in chapter 22 it moves into the foreground. In this chapter, the prophet is called on to act as prosecuting counsel, making known to Jerusalem in detail her detestable ways, which form the basis for both the actuality and the immediacy of divine judgment. The comprehensive nature of her sins means that judgment is *necessary* and judgment is *now*.

The prophet begins by presenting his indictment in outline form (22:3–5): Jerusalem's sins involve both social sins—that is, sins against humanity (e.g., "shedding blood," 22:3)—and cultic sins—that is, sins against God (e.g., the manufacture of idols, 22:3). These two broad classes of sins have resulted in two respective consequences: social sins lead to "guilt" ('āšam, 22:4), the forensic state of deserving punishment, while cultic sins lead to "defilement" (tāmē', 22:4), the ritual state of being unfit to appear in the

presence of God. The combination of these in Jerusalem's case means that she has brought on herself her "doom," or more literally, "her time" (*'ittāh*, 22:3); her days have come to a close, and the end of her years have come (v. 4).

Like a virus in the bloodstream, Jerusalem's defilement and guilt have built up to the point where they now initiate a life-threatening crisis. Now the hour of her judgment has struck. The result of that judgment will make Jerusalem into an "object of scorn" to the nations around her. Both those near at hand and those far away will mock her as being an "infamous city" (22:5), that is, famous for her cultic and social sins, which have led to her downfall.

Verses 6–12 give the first catalogue of Jerusalem's crimes, showing how she has offended against God's law. The charges are directed against the "princes of Israel," a phrase normally understood as designating the former kings of Judah. Thus in view are not merely present sins but a continuing history of sin on the part of Judah's leadership.² The kings are specifically indicted because it was their responsibility to establish justice in the community, especially by protecting the poor and weak (Ps. 72:1–4).

The sins listed here are not a random collection of charges, but specifically an accusation of having violated the laws of the Pentateuch, especially those of the so-called "Holiness Code" of Leviticus 18–20; 25.3 Thus in Ezekiel 22:7, the accusation that "they have treated father and mother with contempt" has a basis in Leviticus 20:9, while the claim that they oppressed the alien is based on Leviticus 19:33. The same is true of the remainder of the charges made by the prophet: "despis[ing] my holy things and desecrat[ing] my Sabbaths" (see 19:30), slandering (see 19:16), eating "at the mountain shrines" (see 19:26, LXX), "commit[ting] lewd acts" (see 20:14), "dishonor[ing] their fathers' bed" (see 20:11), "violat[ing] women during their period" (see 18:19), "commit[ting] a detestable offense with [one's] neighbor's wife" (see 20:10), "defil[ing one's] daughter-in-law" (see 20:12), "violat[ing one's] sister" (see 20:17), "tak[ing] usury and excessive interest" (see 25:36), and "mak[ing] unjust gain from your neighbors" (see 19:13).

Though the charges themselves are largely drawn from the Holiness Code, the specific turn of phrase is in many places influenced by Deuteronomy, for instance, in the final concluding phrase: "You have forgotten me" (Ezek. 22:12; cf. Deut. 8:14, 19). The end result, then, is a comprehensive indictment of the former rulers of Judah on the basis of the law of Moses; the covenant bond forged on Mount Sinai has been broken.⁵ The "holy nation" (Ex. 19:6) has become thoroughly unholy.

Such a comprehensive catalogue of sins can have only one outcome. As Deuteronomy 8:19 makes clear: "If you ever forget the LORD your God . . . you will surely be destroyed." So the next two sections (Ezek. 22:13–16, 17–22) deal with the Lord's response to his people's sin under the twin images of *judgment by scattering* and *judgment by gathering*. The literary device of using two diametrically opposite images together underscores once again the comprehensive nature of Judah's doom.

Verse 13 acts as the link between the accusation and the threat of punishment, summarizing the accusation by putting together the last charge ("unjust gain") with the first ("blood you have shed in your midst," cf. v. 3) in a reversed arrangement to form a chiasm. Because of these things the Lord will now act, dispersing Judah among the nations and scattering them through the countries (22:15). In this way, the Lord will bring an end to Judah's uncleanness (22:15). Though such a fate for the Lord's people would be "defiling" to the Lord6 in front of the nations, it was a necessary price to pay. As Leslie Allen puts it, the Lord's defilement through Judah's exile "was the lesser of two evils that he was prepared to endure as the price to pay for making his forgetful people remember who and what he was."

But this scattering is not the only dimension of judgment threatened. Paradoxically, there appears also a "gathering for judgment," as the house of Israel is gathered into Jerusalem, into the heart of the smelter's furnace, to experience the destructive impact of the full outpouring of the Lord's wrath (22:18–22). This is paradoxical not merely because "gathering" is the logical opposite of "scattering," but also because the terminology of gathering is elsewhere normally used in a positive sense.

The conventional use of the imagery envisages first a scattering of God's people in his wrath and then, after the judgment has had a purifying effect, a gathering of God's people in his mercy. For instance, in 11:17 the Sovereign Lord promises to gather his people from the countries where they have been scattered.⁸ Although he frequently uses "gathering" in this conventional, positive sense, Ezekiel has already indicated a possible negative aspect of gathering as a precondition for judgment rather than salvation in 20:34.

Here in chapter 22, however, it functions together with its opposite "scattering" to underline the comprehensive nature of the coming judgment.

Nor is this the only conventionally positive theme given a negative twist in Ezekiel 22. The image of judgment as the refiner's fire, purifying the dross to leave only the pure metal, appears several times in the Bible (notably in Isa. 1:21–31; 48:10; Mal. 3:2–3). But in Ezekiel 22, as in Jeremiah 6:27–30, the refining process has a purely negative product, with nothing but unpurged molten dross produced. The purpose of this divine act of judgment, then, is not to purify his people, but merely to pour out on rebellious sinners his fiery wrath.

This outpouring of God's wrath has not yet happened to Judah, notwithstanding the disasters of 605 and 597 B.C. She remains "a land not cleansed or showered in the day of wrath" (Ezek. 22:24). Most commentators understand this as the removal of the covenant blessing of rain, an idea that is certainly common in the Old Testament (e.g., Lev. 26:19). However, in context the "day of wrath" is a future event, so the absence of rain must refer to the absence of an element of judgment. The concept of rain on the land as an element of judgment is present in the Flood narrative (Gen. 7:4, 11), and the expectation of a future destructive flood is reflected in Ezekiel 13:11 and 38:22. It may therefore be better to understand 22:24 as the absence of a cleansing deluge, like the great Flood, which would have purged the land of evildoers in one great day of destruction. Because of this lack of cleansing in the past, the land remains full of oppression, detailed in the following verses, which will lead to a final pouring out of indignation on the people (22:31).

If the first catalogue of the sins of Jerusalem was detailed with reference to the law (esp. Lev. 18–20; 25), the second catalogue of Jerusalem's sins is detailed with reference to one of the prophets, namely, Zephaniah 3:3–4. Though Zephaniah's four categories of leaders charged with wrongdoing (officials, rulers, prophets, and priests) are expanded to five (princes, priests, officials, prophets, and people of the land), the underlying continuity between the charges is clear: All of the leadership classes in Judah are charged and found guilty of wrongdoing.

The "princes," described as being like "a roaring lion," have wreaked havor through a series of social sins (Ezek. 22:25). In effect, they

preenacted the societal devastation that the Babylonians would bring to full measure when they destroyed Jerusalem.¹³

The "officials," described as "wolves," have likewise misused their power for the purpose of "unjust gain" (22:27).

Even the "priests," who elsewhere in Ezekiel are not singled out for any blame, except in the explicit reversal of this charge in Ezek. 44:23–24, did "violence to my law and profane my holy things" (22:26). They have failed in their task of protecting Yahweh's holy things by not teaching the proper distinction between holy and unholy, clean and unclean. The unusual phrase "they shut their eyes to the keeping of my Sabbaths" seems to indicate the priests' failure to prosecute those who transgressed the law (cf. a similar phrase in Lev. 20:4).

Meanwhile the "prophets" are condemned in terms similar to Ezekiel 13 as unreliable whitewashers, telling people what they wanted to hear in the Lord's name, when he had not sent them (22:28).

The "people of the land," who in this context should be identified as a group of powerful men in Jerusalem with close ties to the Davidic house,¹⁴ have also been taking advantage of their position. They have been exploiting those unable to defend themselves: "the poor and needy and . . . the alien" (22:29).

After the conclusion of the second catalogue of sins, we again read of the Lord's twofold response. He first of all sought for "a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land" (22:30). In other words, he sought a true prophet (cf. 13:5)—someone who would take on the difficult and dangerous task of interceding for the people, just as Moses did successfully after the incident of the golden calf (Ps. 106:23). But this time no one was found to deflect God's wrath, and thus the all-consuming fiery anger of God will descend on Jerusalem (Ezek. 22:31). As if to emphasize the connection to the destruction of Jerusalem depicted in chapters 9–11, the last, ominous words of the Lord are the same in both cases: "[I will bring] down on their own heads all they have done" (22:31; cf. 11:21).

Bridging Contexts

JERUSALEM AS SPIRITUAL CENTER. Few contemporary readers are aware of the unique place that Jerusalem occupied in preexilic Israel. She was not merely the ancient equivalent of London or Washington, D.C., the seat of government and power; she was the spiritual center of God's people, the one place in all the earth where God had chosen to place his name. Thus in Psalm 48 the praise of God and the praise of Zion go hand in hand. Jerusalem is "the city of our God," Mount Zion is "his holy mountain," the unique place of God's presence (Ps. 48:1, 3).

To describe its significance the psalmist borrows the language of Canaanite mythology: It is exalted above the other mountains, like the uttermost heights of Mount Zaphon, the supposed home of the Canaanite pantheon.¹⁵ It was the very center of the earth, both geographically and theologically (Ezek. 5:5).¹⁶ Of course, Jerusalem gained that spiritual significance from its role as the home of the temple built by Solomon, on which the Lord had promised to set his name (1 Kings 9:3). But the city itself stood within the aura of holiness created by the temple, so that her walls and towers became objects of spiritual meditation (Ps. 48:12–13) and she herself was a place of pilgrimage and a subject of prayer (Ps. 122).

But as a consequence of that unique significance, Jerusalem was also required to be a place of radical holiness. As the psalmist says: "Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place?" (Ps. 24:3; cf. Ps. 15). The laws governing the entrance ways into the temple and the offering of the sacrifices were designed to prevent the intrusion of the profane into the place of the sacred. The accusation of Ezekiel 22 was that the barriers against the profane had comprehensively broken down. The entirely "holy city" had become the entirely "unholy city." The very heart of Judah, geographically and theologically, had become corrupted by sin. In place of the assertion of the psalmist "God is within her," from which followed the assurance "she will not fall" (Ps. 46:5), Ezekiel charged, with the repeated use of the catchwords $d\bar{a}m$ ("blood[shed]") and $b^et\bar{o}k\bar{e}k$ ("in your midst"), that "you have shed [blood] in your midst" (Ezek. 22:13), from which followed the certainty that God's wrath would fall. There could be no escape for the radically polluted "city of God."

The contaminating nature of blood in ancient Israel. The other aspect of Ezekiel 22 that will not be readily recognized by contemporary readers is the specially contaminating nature of blood in ancient Israel. To be sure, the

idea of bloodstained hands being repellent is familiar to us. We need only think of Shakespeare's depiction of Lady Macbeth, a figure tormented by the vision of hands indelibly stained with the blood of her victim, so that even though she washed her hands repeatedly the foul spots could not be removed. But the revulsion in ancient Israelite society to the shedding of innocent blood was even stronger. The blood, whether of an animal or of a person, contained the life and was therefore to be treated with special reverence (Lev. 17:11). When a domestic animal was sacrificed, this reverence required that the blood was to be sprinkled on the altar (17:6); if a wild animal were killed for food, its blood was to be drained onto the ground before the meat could be consumed (17:13).

Anyone failing to observe these measures was deemed "guilty of bloodshed" and was to be cut off from the covenant people. This requirement was intended to underline the sacredness of all life, both animal and human.¹⁷ Those who failed to show respect for the life of others would be excluded from the covenant community, the place where life was to be found. What prospect then awaits the city that has become as deeply defiled as it is possible to be, filled with bloodshed (Ezek. 22:3–4)? It is only a matter of time before she will be cut off—and Ezekiel affirms that the time of Jerusalem's complete destruction has now indeed come.

Contemporary Significance

Dies Irae. When I was a university student I participated in a performance of Mozart's Requiem. We were told the story of how, while seriously ill, Mozart was approached by a mysterious stranger who commissioned him to write a Requiem Mass. Mozart became convinced that this was an angelic visitation, telling him to write a Requiem for himself. Though he did not live to complete his final work—it was finished from his notes by one of his students—the result is a powerful and compelling piece of music. One of the most emotionally charged parts of the Requiem for me was his rendition of the ancient Latin hymn Dies Irae. To the accompaniment of crashing chords, the fortissimo voices cry out, "Dies irae, dies illa, solvet saeclum in favilla, teste David cum Sibylla. . . ." Although I did not really understand the words (one year of high school Latin will only take you so far), I knew it had something to do with the Judgment Day, and the thought of a

desperately ill genius composing the music with which to face his own Maker gave it a powerful emotional appeal.

I recently discovered an English translation of the *Dies Irae*, and realized that I had barely begun to understand the power of its conviction:

Day of wrath! O day of mourning! See fulfilled the prophet's warning— Heaven and earth in ashes burning! Oh, what fear man's bosom rendeth, When from heav'n the Judge descendeth, On Whose sentence all dependeth! Wondrous sound the trumpet flingeth, Through earth's sepulchers it ringeth, All before the throne it bringeth. Death is struck and nature quaking, All Creation is awaking, To its Judge an answer making. Lo! the book exactly worded, Wherein all hath been recorded; Thence shall judgment be awarded. When the Judge His seat attaineth, And each hidden deed arraigneth, Nothing unavenged remaineth.¹⁸

Such a stirring vision of the final judgment is not found in many contemporary worship songs, nor indeed in many hymnbooks in current use. These days we sing of the love of God and of the mercy and grace of God, but not, it seems, of the wrath of God and of the reality and certainty of final judgment. Why not?

Taking sin seriously. I think that the answer lies in our failure to understand the *reality* and the *comprehensiveness* of our sin. The person unconvinced of the reality and comprehensiveness of Jerusalem's sin, when faced with its destruction in 586 B.C., asks, "Why wouldn't God save her?" Ezekiel seeks to redirect that question so that the questioner asks: "How could a holy God do anything other than condemn her?" His method was simply to demonstrate the fact and the scope of her sin.

Modern people are equally unconvinced of the reality of their sin. The message of Paul that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23) is not one that finds a ready hearing in today's society. We tend to redefine sin out of existence as dysfunction or psychological weakness. What used to be called sin is now merely an "alternative lifestyle." Our culture has "defined deviancy down" to the point that what used to be considered deviant behavior is the new "normal." 19

This is true not merely in society at large but also in the churches. In a recent television interview, the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, bewailed the fact that Britain was in danger of losing its Christian values and complained that the nation had "lost the language of sin." But earlier in the same interview, when questioned about the marital difficulties of Prince Charles, he reportedly responded: "He is a man who takes faith seriously, who attends worship and someone who has struggled as many people struggle with . . . brokenness in relationships. Therefore it's wrong for you and I to sit in judgment on people who are, as we are, people made in the image of God." Apparently persistent adultery and divorce are no longer to be described as "sin"; now they are "brokenness in relationships."

Even those who still talk about sins have frequently lost the sense of the comprehensive nature of our sin. Preachers (and churches) tend to have a shortened list of actual sins that they preach against. Some churches are strong against sexual sins, foul language, and drunkenness but have little to say about the economic sins of unjust business practices or the societal sins of racism that are endemic around us. Other churches speak strongly against structural evils but almost completely neglect the area of private morality. Perhaps we all have a tendency to dwell more on the sins that dog the lives of others than the faults of our own congregations. Not so Ezekiel: No one can escape the range of the charges he addresses.

Along with the loss of the sense of sin goes the loss of understanding of God's wrath. Paul understood that: "We were by nature objects of [God's] wrath" (Eph. 2:3). Why? Because we "were dead in [our] transgressions and sins" (2:1). A knowledge of sin and the understanding of God's wrath go together. It should therefore be no surprise that in a society where sin is no longer believed in, the wrath of God is not understood.²¹ We increasingly ask the question, "Why would a good God sentence anyone to eternal

punishment?" instead of the question, "How can a holy God do anything other than condemn me to the depths of hell?"

Sin and redemption in "the city." The reality of sin, however, is an everyday fact for all of us, perhaps especially for those who live in our major cities. Just as ancient Jerusalem had drawn to itself all manner of detestable practices, so typically the major cities of our world are hotbeds of every kind of vice. This is merely what one would expect, given the origins that the Bible ascribes to the city. In Genesis, the city is Cain's natural territory. It is archetypally the place where no one is his or her brother's keeper. In a small town, everybody not only knows your name and the state of your marriage, they know everything about you, down to how often you change your underwear. That intimate knowledge acts as a powerful brake on public sin. In a big city, by contrast, you can be surrounded by a million people and not know a single soul. Few people know what you do, and fewer still care.

Cain's line is the one that excels in farming, in engineering, and in the arts (Gen. 4:20–22). It increases in power, wealth, and luxury. But paradoxically as it prospers materially it also declines in morals. The problem with the city is not population density but sin. Put a lot of sinners close together and it is not surprising that you will reap degradation. The city draws out what is in humanity, good and bad. It is the place of progress, of technology, of the arts—all of which are good gifts of God, but all of which can so easily be perverted.

Yet God can redeem even the city. The place that in Genesis 1–11 is the home of Cain's descendants and the builders of the tower of Babel becomes in Revelation 21–22 the new Jerusalem, the place where God lives with his people. It will be in a heavenly city that we will know God and be fully known by him, and live in intimate and untroubled fellowship with our brothers and sisters. We were created for society; we were not created to live alone. After the Fall, to be sure, society becomes a mixed blessing. Sin has societal consequences. God's solution, however, is not to call his redeemed people to live a hermit existence in the desert but to form them into a new society, the church, where we share fellowship with those who are our siblings in Christ.

Awakening a sense of sin and presenting God's grace. But how can we awaken a sense of sin in those around us who are as yet outside the church?

In one sense, we cannot. At the heart of the problem is the fact that those outside Christ are dead in their transgressions and sins. How do you wake the dead? Only the Holy Spirit can perform that miracle. Nonetheless, in our preaching we need to have a balance of preaching the law and preaching the gospel.

Ezekiel's methodology for addressing the people of his own day was to show them how far short they had fallen of the standards laid down in God's Word. He indicted his hearers comprehensively of crimes against the Law and the Prophets. The standards he used were not those of contemporary society, with which they might compare favorably, but God's perfect law, before which all stood condemned. He showed them the extent to which sin had contaminated the very heart of their society. He charged them not merely with sin in general, but of detailed specific sins of comprehensive range. Only after they had been confronted with the reality and depth of their sin could they come to an understanding of the rightness of God's wrath against them. Only then could the good news of God's grace be preached to them.

On the basis of the approach of Ezekiel and some of the other prophets, it has sometimes been insisted that the law is a necessary first step toward understanding the gospel, as if only after first understanding fully the claims of the law can one come to Christ.²² In fact, however, law and grace belong together in contributing to our understanding of sin and thus our understanding of our need for Christ. If we merely understand the law without seeing God's grace, we can fall into the trap of seeing God as the cosmic policeman, upholding apparently arbitrary standards that get in the way of our self-fulfillment. This view of God was the serpent's goal in his questioning of Eve in the Garden of Eden. He sought to maximize the restrictiveness of God's law ("Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" Gen. 3:1) and to minimize God's gracious goodness ("God knows that when you eat of it . . . you will be like God, knowing good and evil," 3:5).

Equally, if we merely understand grace without seeing the place of the law, then we may view God as the cosmic grandfather, understanding all and therefore forgiving all. What is important is not so much the order in which law and grace are proclaimed but the fact that both are clearly proclaimed. Perhaps rather than a fixed order of proclamation, it would be

better to view their relationship as a dynamic relationship, more of a circle than a straight line.

Law and grace understood together point us to our need for Christ. In Christ, we see that God's law is good and perfect, designed for our utmost fulfillment as human beings; the only utterly fulfilled person who ever lived is also the only person who ever fully kept God's law. Yet in Christ we see the full meaning of God's grace—that grace is (in the children's acronym) God's Riches At Christ's Expense. Forgiveness for us is complete, full, and free. But it was not without cost. The cost of free forgiveness was borne for us on the cross, where Jesus purchased the blood-filled Jerusalem and her (un)spiritual descendants in order to rehab her into his heavenly bride, the new Jerusalem, in whom God can dwell forever.

The author of the *Dies Irae* understood clearly that law and grace go together. Thus, having trumpeted the threats of the law, he goes on:

What shall I, frail man, be pleading, Who for me be interceding, When the just are mercy needing? King of majesty tremendous, Who dost free salvation send us, Fount of pity, then befriend us! Think, good Jesus! My salvation Caused thy wondrous Incarnation; Leave me not to reprobation. Faint and weary Thou hast sought me On the cross of suffering bought me; Shall such grace be vainly brought me? Righteous Judge! For sin's pollution Grant Thy gift of absolution, Ere that day of retribution. Guilty, now I pour my moaning, All my shame with anguish owning, Spare, O God, Thy suppliant groaning.

Someone to stand in the gap. The problem facing Ezekiel was not simply that he encountered a few defiled individuals, who needed to hear the

gospel. Jerusalem herself, the holy city, was completely defiled. There was no righteous remnant; no one in the catalogue of leaders was left free from the taint of sin, not even the priests. There was literally no one to stand in the gap for her. In Abraham's day, a quorum of ten righteous men might have saved Sodom. In Jerusalem, the new Sodom (Ezek. 16:46), there is not even left one righteous Lot who will escape.

Such too is the world in which we live. The best of our righteousness is as filthy rags in the presence of a holy God. As Christians we know that we are saved not by our righteousness, but by the One who stood in the gap for us, Jesus Christ himself, who bore the full weight of the true *dies irae*, the day of God's wrath. On that day, the sun was turned to darkness while he suffered the full weight of the punishment our sins deserved (Matt. 27:45). The earth itself convulsed and the curtain in the temple, the barrier closing off the presence of God in the Most Holy Place, was torn in two, opening up a gap for us to come to God. As we come, we in turn are called to share in the prophetic ministry of "standing in the gap." We are called to intercede in prayer for the lost, taking the risk of rejection and persecution as we warn them of the wrath to come, and to live lives of purity as we wait so that nothing may hinder the message of life that is proclaimed through us.

Ezekiel 23

The word of the LORD came to me: ²"Son of man, there were two women, daughters of the same mother. ³They became prostitutes in Egypt, engaging in prostitution from their youth. In that land their breasts were fondled and their virgin bosoms caressed. ⁴The older was named Oholah, and her sister was Oholibah. They were mine and gave birth to sons and daughters. Oholah is Samaria, and Oholibah is Jerusalem.

5"Oholah engaged in prostitution while she was still mine; and she lusted after her lovers, the Assyrians—warriors ⁶ clothed in blue, governors and commanders, all of them handsome young men, and mounted horsemen. ⁷She gave herself as a prostitute to all the elite of the Assyrians and defiled herself with all the idols of everyone she lusted after. ⁸She did not give up the prostitution she began in Egypt, when during her youth men slept with her, caressed her virgin bosom and poured out their lust upon her.

⁹"Therefore I handed her over to her lovers, the Assyrians, for whom she lusted. ¹⁰They stripped her naked, took away her sons and daughters and killed her with the sword. She became a byword among women, and punishment was inflicted on her.

¹¹"Her sister Oholibah saw this, yet in her lust and prostitution she was more depraved than her sister. ¹²She too lusted after the Assyrians—governors and commanders, warriors in full dress, mounted horsemen, all handsome young men. ¹³I saw that she too defiled herself; both of them went the same way.

14"But she carried her prostitution still further. She saw men portrayed on a wall, figures of Chaldeans portrayed in red, ¹⁵with belts around their waists and flowing turbans on their heads; all of them looked like Babylonian chariot officers, natives of Chaldea. ¹⁶As soon as she saw them, she lusted after them and sent messengers to them in Chaldea. ¹⁷Then the Babylonians came to her, to the bed of love, and in their lust they defiled her. After she had been defiled by them, she turned away from them in disgust. ¹⁸When she carried on her prostitution openly and exposed her nakedness, I turned away from her in disgust, just as I had turned away from her sister. ¹⁹Yet she became more and more promiscuous as she recalled the days of her youth, when she was a prostitute in Egypt. ²⁰There she lusted after her lovers, whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose emission was like that of horses. ²¹So you longed for the lewdness of your youth, when in Egypt your bosom was caressed and your young breasts fondled.

²²"Therefore, Oholibah, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will stir up your lovers against you, those you turned away from in disgust, and I will bring them against you from every side—²³the Babylonians and all the Chaldeans, the men of Pekod and Shoa and Koa, and all the Assyrians with them, handsome young men, all of them governors and commanders, chariot officers and men of high rank, all mounted on horses. ²⁴They will come against you with weapons, chariots and wagons and with a throng of people; they will take up positions against you on every side with large and small shields and with helmets. I will turn you over to them for punishment, and they will punish you according to their standards. ²⁵I will direct my jealous anger against you, and they will deal with you in fury. They will cut off your noses and your

ears, and those of you who are left will fall by the sword. They will take away your sons and daughters, and those of you who are left will be consumed by fire. ²⁶They will also strip you of your clothes and take your fine jewelry. ²⁷So I will put a stop to the lewdness and prostitution you began in Egypt. You will not look on these things with longing or remember Egypt anymore.

²⁸"For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am about to hand you over to those you hate, to those you turned away from in disgust. ²⁹They will deal with you in hatred and take away everything you have worked for. They will leave you naked and bare, and the shame of your prostitution will be exposed. Your lewdness and promiscuity ³⁰have brought this upon you, because you lusted after the nations and defiled yourself with their idols. ³¹You have gone the way of your sister; so I will put her cup into your hand.

32"This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

"You will drink your sister's cup, a cup large and deep; it will bring scorn and derision, for it holds so much.

³³You will be filled with drunkenness and sorrow,

the cup of ruin and desolation, the cup of your sister Samaria.

34You will drink it and drain it dry; you will dash it to pieces and tear your breasts.

I have spoken, declares the Sovereign LORD.

35"Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Since you have forgotten me and thrust me

behind your back, you must bear the consequences of your lewdness and prostitution."

³⁶The LORD said to me: "Son of man, will you judge Oholah and Oholibah? Then confront them with their detestable practices, ³⁷for they have committed adultery and blood is on their hands. They committed adultery with their idols; they even sacrificed their children, whom they bore to me, as food for them. ³⁸They have also done this to me: At that same time they defiled my sanctuary and desecrated my Sabbaths. ³⁹On the very day they sacrificed their children to their idols, they entered my sanctuary and desecrated it. That is what they did in my house.

⁴⁰"They even sent messengers for men who came from far away, and when they arrived you bathed yourself for them, painted your eyes and put on your jewelry. ⁴¹You sat on an elegant couch, with a table spread before it on which you had placed the incense and oil that belonged to me.

⁴²"The noise of a carefree crowd was around her; Sabeans were brought from the desert along with men from the rabble, and they put bracelets on the arms of the woman and her sister and beautiful crowns on their heads. ⁴³Then I said about the one worn out by adultery, 'Now let them use her as a prostitute, for that is all she is.' ⁴⁴And they slept with her. As men sleep with a prostitute, so they slept with those lewd women, Oholah and Oholibah. ⁴⁵But righteous men will sentence them to the punishment of women who commit adultery and shed blood, because they are adulterous and blood is on their hands.

⁴⁶"This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Bring a mob against them and give them over to terror and plunder. ⁴⁷The mob will stone them and cut them

down with their swords; they will kill their sons and daughters and burn down their houses.

⁴⁸"So I will put an end to lewdness in the land, that all women may take warning and not imitate you. ⁴⁹You will suffer the penalty for your lewdness and bear the consequences of your sins of idolatry. Then you will know that I am the Sovereign LORD."

Original Meaning

As IN CHAPTER 16, the prophet depicts the history and future of Judah by means of an extended metaphor, picturing Jerusalem and Samaria as two exceedingly wanton women. The shockingly explicit language and not particularly disguised identities of the cities combine to give the resulting picture an "in-your-face" effect, whose emotional impact is far greater than a similar indictment in dry legal terminology would have been. If, as Paul Ricoeur has argued, metaphor involves the "felt participation" of the reader, then in Ezekiel 23 the prophet harnesses all of the emotional impact of a graphic portrayal of sexual perversion to drive home the point that Jerusalem's coming destruction is both the deserved and the inevitable consequence of her past actions.

Two women are introduced in the opening verses as sisters, sharing a common mother (23:2). This is intended to denote not merely the historical fact of a shared heredity between the northern and southern kingdoms but a deeper commonality: Though they are two in number, they are one in nature, living parallel lives.² This essential identity is underlined by the names they are given: Samaria is designated "Oholah" while Jerusalem is named "Oholibah." The meaning of these names ("her tent" and "my tent is in her") does not seem to be in this case of any particular significance; rather, it is the similarity of their names that draws our attention. Oholah and Oholibah go together like Tweedledum and Tweedledee.³

These sisters have behaved alike from their youth. Already in Egypt they gave themselves over to prostitution (Ezek. 23:3). But in spite of that, the Lord "made honest women of them" (to use a Victorian phrase): He married them and they became the mothers of his children (23:4). Thus far, there is

nothing controversial about Ezekiel's retelling of history. God had entered an exclusive relationship of overlordship, a covenant, with Israel, in spite of Israel's checkered history. Israel's undistinguished past in terms of their faithfulness to the Lord was not particularly news to those familiar with the events recounted in Exodus and Numbers: the grumbling at Marah (Ex. 15:23–24), the golden calf (Ex. 32), the bad report of the spies (Num. 13:26–33), Korah's rebellion (Num. 16), the immorality with the Moabites (Num. 25). Besides, that was all ancient history.

In the next verses, however, Ezekiel brings his hearers down to the present in a hurry with a brief sketch of the history of the older sister, Oholah (i.e., Samaria, the northern kingdom; Ezek. 23:5–10). Not content with the Lord, she traded her attentions elsewhere. She lusted after the Assyrians, seeking to enter a covenant with them, a politico-religious alliance that implied a repudiation of trust in the Lord as her sole provider. What attracted her to the Assyrians was their power and prestige. They all appeared to her as warriors—horsemen and charioteers, governors and commanders, dressed in splendid garments of blue (23:6).

The historical background of this assertion is not hard to trace. From around 841–840 B.C., Israel was involved in an alliance with Assyria when Shalmaneser III received a substantial tribute from Jehu. Climbing into bed with Assyria may have seemed the logical—perhaps the only possible—political option to Israel's leadership, but it was also tantamount to a rejection of trust in the Lord in favor of Assyria's idols, with which Israel now defiled herself (23:7). It was a return to her former way of life in Egypt, from which the Lord had redeemed her (23:8). The consequences of her lifestyle choice were severe, yet fitting. The Lord gave her over into the hand of her lovers, the Assyrians (23:9). The very things that attracted her to them rebounded against her. Their warrior power was exerted against her, and far from clothing her in similar manner to themselves they stripped her naked and killed her (23:10).

But Oholah is not Ezekiel's real interest. The brief sketch of her history merely sets up a paradigm of sin and punishment to which the subsequent history of her southern sister can be compared. Oholah became a "byword" (lit., a "name") among women, and judgments were done to her (23:10). This is her function in the chapter: Her history is known and (from a southern perspective) regarded as a just fate for her sin. But the question is,

"Has her younger sister applied to herself the lessons to be drawn from the older sister's fate?"

As the chapter unfolds, it is evident that she has not. Oholibah is not merely like her sister; she is *worse* than her sister. Nor is this depravity the result of ignorance: Her sister "saw" and yet still became more depraved in her lust, committing more adulteries than her sister (23:11). She first sinned in exactly the same way with the Assyrians (23:12, which closely recapitulates 23:5–6), and then added to her little black book the Babylonians (23:14). She was worse in her wantonness than her sister not merely in the number of her lovers (two as against one) but in the nature of their relationship. She was attracted to the Babylonians by a mere wall depiction; entranced by the vision of them she herself sent messengers to Babylon to get them (23:16). She was thus not merely willing to be seduced but was herself the active seductress. They thus became idols come to life for her: Like the idols of the house of Israel in 8:10, they are described as "portrayed on a wall, figures of Chaldeans" (23:14). Though they may be attractively dressed up, they are merely an old idolatry warmed over.

Once more, the historical details lie not far below the surface of the metaphor. Judah's relationship with Assyria went back to at least 734 B.C., when Ahaz appealed to Tiglath-Pileser for assistance against Pekah of Israel and Rezin of Damascus (2 Kings 16:5–7; Isa. 7:1–2). In 714 B.C., Hezekiah entertained ambassadors from the Babylonian ruler Merodach-Baladan, who was seeking to rally support against the Assyrians (2 Kings 20:12–19). When the Babylonian-led resistance crumbled, Hezekiah once again apparently sent tribute to the Assyrians. But by 605 B.C. Babylon had established itself as the dominant power in the region, and Judah was in a vassal relationship toward them.

What his compatriots may have read as political necessity, however, Ezekiel presents in a different light: Submission to these relationships is nothing less than spiritual adultery against their true covenant head, the Lord himself. Once again, the prophet seeks to challenge Judah's complacent sense of moral and spiritual superiority to her former northern neighbor.

Her adulterous liaisons did not satisfy Oholibah. Having been defiled by her lovers, she became disgusted with them and turned away from them (Ezek. 23:17). But in turning away from her adulterous lovers, she still did

not turn away from her love of adultery. She continued her prostitution openly, so that the Lord turned away from her, just as he had earlier turned away from her sister (23:18).

Yet even this did not deter her from her course; it was a case of "train a child in the way [s]he should go, and when [s]he is old [s]he will not turn from it" (Prov. 22:6). She remembered the days of her youth in Egypt, not as the time when the Lord delivered her from bondage (as the book of Deuteronomy repeatedly urges Israel to remember Egypt^s) but as the time when they enjoyed pleasures no longer theirs (cf. Num. 11:5). As DeVries puts it: "She had forgotten what she should have remembered and remembered what she should have forgotten." In her lust, she was not even limited by natural relationships; instead, she sought those whose sexual capacities were not merely superhuman but positively bestial ("whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose emission [lit., floods] was like that of horses," Ezek. 23:20).

The result of such thoroughgoing depravity is predictable: A fitting judgment will fall on the head of the wanton woman. The Lord "will stir up" her lovers against her from all around (23:22), not merely the Babylonians and Assyrians but men from Pekod, Shoa, and Koa as well." As with Oholah, the things that attracted Oholibah to her lovers are now used against her. Their strength and military prowess now become the means of assaulting her on every side; weaponry, chariotry, armor, and numbers are now turned against Jerusalem (23:24). God will "turn [his wayward people] over to them for punishment," and as a result their enemies will be allowed to "punish [them] according to their standards."

This combination of divine and human judgment is further developed in the following verses. The Lord says, "I will direct my jealous anger against you, and they will deal with you in fury" (23:25). As Jerusalem's sins were worse than her sister's, so also will her punishment be. She will not only be stripped but also disfigured, and her children will not only be taken from her but will also fall by the sword and be consumed by fire (23:25). The goal of this judgment is a proper amnesia: forgetting the prostitution begun in Egypt (23:27). Her lovers have now become her enemies, who will strip her and plunder her (23:28–29). As she followed in the pattern of her elder sister, so now she will share her elder sister's fate and drink from the same bitter cup of sorrow, all the way down to its dregs (23:32–34). In her shame,

she will tear out the bodily members that led her into sin in the first place, her breasts.¹³

In the remaining verses (23:36–49), Ezekiel is once more cast into the role of prosecuting attorney ("Son of man, will you judge. . . ?") as the point of the metaphor is driven home. Jerusalem¹⁴ is to be confronted with her adultery and bloodshed. This section links together the political charges of the earlier part of chapter 23 with the social and cultic charges of chapter 22. Adultery has taken place at home and on the road, with domestic and foreign idols. At home, sanctuary and Sabbath have been defiled, and even their children have been sacrificed (23:38–39). Not content with such "homegrown" heresies, they have sent messengers far and wide to all comers (23:40). But in spite of their beauty preparations and makeup, their true nature is becoming clear to all: an aging, worn-out prostitute, desired not for her charms but for her availability and price (23:43).

Once more, the conclusion of the sisters' activities is clearly stated: An army will come, plundering them, stoning them, and putting them to the sword. Their children will be slaughtered, their homes burned (23:47). Thus the Lord will bring to an end all such adultery. This time the object lesson will be heeded (unlike in v. 10), and "all women" will be chastened and not do likewise (23:48). The chapter closes with the recognition formula: "Then you will know that I am the Sovereign LORD" (23:49).

Bridging Contexts

THE NATURE OF METAPHOR. Metaphors and related forms of pictorial speech are among the most culture-specific means of expression. Is it truly possible to explain to anyone not brought up in a cricketing nation what it means to be "playing on a sticky wicket"? The entire effectiveness of the metaphor depends on shared "commonplaces," a range of ideas associated with the image used in the metaphor. These ideas are culturally determined. The metaphor "the LORD is my shepherd" naturally means something slightly different in an ancient Near Eastern context from what it does in a Scottish context because Scottish shepherds are associated with a different set of ideas from ancient Near Eastern shepherds—for instance, the use of sheep dogs.

This difficulty may, of course, be overcome in many cases if readers immerse themselves sufficiently in the source culture to understand the ideas associated with the image in question. It becomes problematic, however, when the reader finds the image adopted is not merely alien but antagonistic. The perspective of the metaphor is not simply different from their perspective but is positively repulsive to it. This situation tends to trigger an instinctive response in the reader of rejection toward the metaphor.

This process may happen on a personal level, as when a person who has a bad relationship with his or her own human father finds it hard to accept the biblical image of God as "Father." But this same process can also happen on a cultural level. For example, the Sawi people of Irian Jaya celebrated men who formed friendships with the express purpose of later betraying the befriended one in order to be killed and eaten.¹⁸ This cultural association naturally made it hard for them to understand the gospel, for on their cultural reading Judas was evidently the hero of the story.

By the same token, the metaphor of Ezekiel 23 is not merely alien to our twentieth-century Western culture, it is, to many people, antagonistic. That antagonism may be expressed in mild language ("We cannot but feel ill at ease with the harsh way in which guilt and blame for sexual misconduct is presented . . . as primarily a female responsibility")¹⁹ or in harsh language ("a pornographic fantasy"),²⁰ but it is there in most contemporary expositions. What is alien is not so much the message itself—for the message of Ezekiel 23 is not fundamentally different from that of the preceding chapters—but the form in which the message is delivered, the metaphor itself. It is the envelope in which the letter comes that causes offense, not the letter itself.

Understanding the ancient marital metaphor. What shall we say about this envelope? Perhaps in the face of contemporary revulsion, we do well to recognize how accurately it communicated truth within its own cultural context. It relied on certain cultural commonplaces. It assumed (1) the idea of the capital city as the "wife" of the deity,²¹ (2) the idea that political alliances with foreign nations were a breach of that covenant relationship, analogous to adultery,²² (3) the idea that multiple adultery on the part of a woman was shocking and perverse, and (4) the idea that the appropriate punishment for adultery was death (Lev. 20:10). If those presuppositions

are affirmed, then Ezekiel makes his case with considerable logic and great emotional power that the city of Jerusalem has become polluted by her adultery and God is entirely justified in bringing in the agents of his choice. To be sure, attention is uniquely focused in this chapter on the punishment of the adulteress rather than that of her lovers, but the remaining chapters of Ezekiel make it clear that the other nations will not escape God's judgment either (Ezek. 25–32; cf. 21:30–32).

However, we should also recognize that the cultural "commonplaces" affirmed above are different from those generally accepted today. Multiple adultery is now often regarded as self-fulfillment. It is depicted positively in novels and movies as something to be envied and emulated. Violence against women, on the other hand, is one of the few remaining taboos, an act that rightly generates strong feelings of revulsion. What is more, many people in our society question the use of the death penalty for any crime, let alone for adultery. Indeed, most within the church would rightly be uncomfortable with the idea of executing adulterers.²³ So we have to recognize that the envelope in which it is packaged makes it hard for contemporary readers to "hear" the message of Ezekiel 23.

This fact was illustrated personally for me at a recent scholarly conference where a paper was presented on Ezekiel 23. The presenter argued that on close examination the chapter deconstructed its own message, a message the presenter herself found to be theologically problematic. In personal conversation after the lecture, it transpired that part of the presenter's interest in and concern over this particular passage stemmed from her own experience in hearing it used to justify the abuse of women. Because of her experiences and feminist perspective, the metaphor adopted by the prophet was deeply troubling to her, leading her to reject the message contained by the metaphor.

Two ways of using metaphors. However, there are actually two ways of using metaphors to address an audience. One way is to use to the full extent the accepted cultural commonplaces to drive home an unpalatable truth in an inescapable way. That is how the story of the poor man with one ewe lamb, which the prophet Nathan recounted to King David, works (2 Sam. 12:1–4). An inescapable straightforward logic drives the story to its conclusion, at which point the application is made. Alternatively, a metaphor may be used to turn upside down expectations, thus challenging

the "cultural commonplaces." So in the parable of the good Samaritan, the "cultural commonplace" that all Samaritans were filthy scoundrels is challenged by placing the expected villain in what turns out to be the hero's role.

To its original audience, Ezekiel 23 was an example of the first category of usage. Though the women were outrageously unlike any that Ezekiel's audience knew, the metaphor itself was unproblematic: There would have been no question in their minds that the fate of the women was thoroughly deserved. No matter how unpalatable the message that Jerusalem would inevitably be destroyed because of the people's unfaithfulness to God, demonstrated in foreign political alliances, the metaphor clearly worked in that setting.

To a contemporary audience, however, it will be difficult to use it in that way unless considerable work is done first, explaining the ancient Near Eastern perspective.²⁴ It may be more profitable to use it in the second mode, to undermine the contemporary cultural commonplaces that what used to be called sin is simply harmless fun, so long as it takes place between consenting adults. Sin is always a serious business, whether it takes the form of actual adultery or spiritual adultery, the worship of literal false gods of wood and gold or the spiritual false gods of materialism, capitalism, socialism, and every other "ism" that seems to offer a way of "salvation." Sin has serious consequences. It has wages that must always be paid, whether by ourselves in eternity or by Christ on the cross. That belief is far from being a contemporary commonplace. It is, nonetheless, true.

Contemporary Significance

ELIMINATING THE CONCEPT of sin. Sin is an unfashionable concept. Christian counselor John Bettler has pointed out how our very language of sexual sins softens the idea of sin: "We don't commit adultery anymore. We have affairs. . . . Adultery sounds harsh and ugly and destructive. An affair sounds kind of gentle and nice and almost acceptable. In the same way, we don't have homosexuals anymore. We have people with alternative sexual preferences. We've softened the concept of sin." But if we don't have sin, we are no longer sinners. And if we are not sinners, we don't need salvation; we need recovery instead.

Jerusalem was beyond help or recovery. She was a sinner of truly shocking proportions: a multiple-timing, "cheating wife" sort of sinner. There was no "twelve-step" program that could bring about her recovery from her sexual addiction. The "Higher Power" was not there to assist her but to pour out his justified wrath on her for her sin. The Babylonians would come—the very ones in whom she had trusted—and they would bring to an end her existence. It was time to write her sorry obituary: She was a sinner from her youth and a sinner to the end. She belonged together with the sexually immoral, the idolaters, the adulterers, the male prostitutes, the homosexual offenders, the thieves, the greedy, the drunkards, the slanderers, and the swindlers; like them, she would certainly not "inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 6:9–10). It may be countercultural today to assert that "the wages of sin is death" and that those who offend in the smallest way against a pure and holy God deserve to spend an eternity experiencing his wrath, but it is not because that is an unscriptural notion.

All too often in our proclamation of the gospel we shy away from shocking our neighbors with the radical truth of the horrible, hell-deserving nature of sin. In that, we may be motivated by our desire not to put a stumbling block in our neighbor's path. Perhaps we are also motivated by our desire to forget the fact that the personal sins we have ourselves committed are equally hell-deserving. Yet in eliminating the awfulness of sin, we simultaneously eliminate the meaning of the cross, the very heart of the gospel. For if sin is not really all that bad, why did the Son of God have to die to pay the debt that sinners owed?

God's actions to save us. What is the truly remarkable, world-shaking notion in Scripture is not that God's wrath is revealed against all ungodliness (Rom. 1:18). That is simply the logical consequence of his infinite holiness and purity. Rather, what is astonishing is that when that wrath is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness, not all will share Jerusalem's fate. Certainly it is not because some especially righteous human beings do not deserve to share her fate. We all deserve the same judgment. We too are among those on Paul's 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 list—certainly in our thoughts and, in some cases, also in our acts. Paul is speaking of us when he says, "That is what some of you were" (6:11). But God intervened. He acted to save us: "You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by

the Spirit of our God." We were sinners, but now in Christ we are saints. What an amazing change!

But once again Ezekiel 23 reminds us that that change cannot be wrought without the payment of a price. A penalty for sin must be borne (23:49); someone must cover my debt. For me to be reclothed in Christ's righteousness, he had to be stripped naked. For me to be crowned with glory, he had to wear the crown of thorns. For me to live, he had to die. The violence I deserved fell on him; it is by his stripes that I am healed. The wrath to come is real, and if it did not fall on Jesus in my place, then I must bear it myself.

Ezekiel 23 is incorporated into Scripture not to give its readers some kind of salacious fantasy of sex and violence, as some contemporary commentators imagine. Certainly it is intended to shock, as was the case with the other "R-rated" section of Ezekiel's prophecy (ch. 16). But the shock is designed to jolt the comfortable into a recognition of the reality and inevitability of the judgment to come so that we might see the utter folly of trusting in anything—or anyone—less than the living God. It is intended to strip away the pretensions of the pseudo-righteous and expose the naked truth that they too deserve the full weight of God's wrath.

There is no message of hope in Ezekiel 23. The stone is rolled away to reveal the gaping mouth of the tomb, which is ready to swallow up defiled Jerusalem, just as it had earlier swallowed up defiled Samaria. But for those reading Ezekiel 23 from a New Testament perspective, the opened mouth of another tomb speaks a word of comfort even to those as defiled as Jerusalem. Because Christ has died in our place, and more than that has risen from the dead, there is now no condemnation for us who are in Christ Jesus! My death is swallowed up in his victory; my defilement is replaced by his purity, credited to my account. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, I too have been washed, I have been justified, and I am being sanctified. What is more, this is true in spite of the sins that I continue to commit daily. Although I am unfaithful to my commitment to God and continue to sin against him regularly in thought, word, and deed, the gospel continues to be good news for me, a sinner. In the words of William Cowper's hymn:

There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel's veins;

And sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains.

The dying thief rejoiced to see that fountain in his day; And there may I, though vile as he, wash all my sins away.

Dear dying Lamb, Thy precious blood shall never lose its power,

Till all the ransomed church of God be saved, to sin no more.

E'er since by faith I saw the stream Thy flowing wounds supply,

Redeeming love has been my theme, and shall be till I die.

Ezekiel 24

In the ninth year, in the tenth month on the tenth day, the word of the LORD came to me: ²"Son of man, record this date, this very date, because the king of Babylon has laid siege to Jerusalem this very day. ³Tell this rebellious house a parable and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

"'Put on the cooking pot; put it on and pour water into it.

4Put into it the pieces of meat, all the choice pieces—the leg and the shoulder.

Fill it with the best of these bones;

5take the pick of the flock.

Pile wood beneath it for the bones; bring it to a boil and cook the bones in it.

644 'For this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

" 'Woe to the city of bloodshed,
to the pot now encrusted,
whose deposit will not go away!
Empty it piece by piece
without casting lots for them.

7" 'For the blood she shed is in her midst:
She poured it on the bare rock;
she did not pour it on the ground,
where the dust would cover it.

8To stir up wrath and take revenge
I put her blood on the bare rock,
so that it would not be covered.

9" 'Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

" 'Woe to the city of bloodshed! I, too, will pile the wood high.

¹⁰So heap on the wood and kindle the fire.

Cook the meat well, mixing in the spices; and let the bones be charred.

11 Then set the empty pot on the coals till it becomes hot and its copper glows so its impurities may be melted and its deposit burned away.

¹²It has frustrated all efforts; its heavy deposit has not been removed, not even by fire.

13" 'Now your impurity is lewdness. Because I tried to cleanse you but you would not be cleansed from your impurity, you will not be clean again until my wrath against you has subsided.

14" 'I the LORD have spoken. The time has come for me to act. I will not hold back; I will not have pity, nor will I relent. You will be judged according to your conduct and your actions, declares the Sovereign LORD.'"

15The word of the LORD came to me: 16"Son of man, with one blow I am about to take away from you the delight of your eyes. Yet do not lament or weep or shed any tears. 17Groan quietly; do not mourn for the dead. Keep your turban fastened and your sandals on your feet; do not cover the lower part of your face or eat the customary food ∟of mourners」."

¹⁸So I spoke to the people in the morning, and in the evening my wife died. The next morning I did as I had been commanded.

¹⁹Then the people asked me, "Won't you tell us what these things have to do with us?"

²⁰So I said to them, "The word of the LORD came to me: ²¹Say to the house of Israel, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am about to desecrate my sanctuary—the stronghold in which you take pride, the delight of your eyes, the object of your affection. The sons and daughters you left behind will fall by the sword. ²²And you will do as I have done. You will not cover the lower part of your face or eat the customary food Lof mourners」. ²³You will keep your turbans on your heads and your sandals on your feet. You will not mourn or weep but will waste away because of your sins and groan among yourselves. ²⁴Ezekiel will be a sign to you; you will do just as he has done. When this happens, you will know that I am the Sovereign LORD.'

²⁵"And you, son of man, on the day I take away their stronghold, their joy and glory, the delight of their eyes, their heart's desire, and their sons and daughters as well—²⁶on that day a fugitive will come to tell you the news. ²⁷At that time your mouth will be opened; you will speak with him and will no longer be silent. So you will be a sign to them, and they will know that I am the LORD."

Original Meaning

FOR TWENTY-THREE CHAPTERS now, Ezekiel has been proclaiming the wrath to come on Jerusalem. Finally, in Ezekiel 24, the sword of judgment descends on the city. Verses 1–14 are an oracle delivered to the prophet by God on the very day when Nebuchadnezzar's assault on the city began. The message is received by the prophet on the tenth of the tenth month, and the prophet is to make note of this date, which on our reckoning is January 15, 587 B.C., because this is the day on which the king of Babylon laid siege to

Jerusalem (24:2). This date is to be noted because it will subsequently provide further "objective" evidence of the prophet's veracity.

The Day of Reckoning for Jerusalem (24:1–14)

Following the Hebrew more literally, this is the day when Nebuchadnezzar "leaned on" (sāmak) Jerusalem, a word with overtones of the sacrificial system. A worshiper approaching the sanctuary designated the animal to be sacrificed as his through a ritual "leaning on of hands" (Lev. 1:4; 3:2).² By Ezekiel's use of this terminology, Nebuchadnezzar is depicted as designating Jerusalem as the sacrificial lamb—though hardly one without spot or blemish, as the law required—ready to be dismembered for the glory of God.

This sacrificial language leads into a parable to be delivered to³ the "rebellious house" (*bêt hammerî*, 24:3). This is a favorite expression for Judah in Ezekiel,⁴ one that indicates that their rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar is not a glorious (if doomed) fight for freedom and self-determination but rather an expression of their basic rebellious nature—a rebellion fundamentally directed against God. In the parable, Jerusalem is compared to a cooking pot (*sîr*) in which abundant meat has been placed to be cooked (24:3), an image familiar already from 11:7–12. The sacrificial animal has been cut up and all of its pieces "gathered" to be boiled, presumably as a fellowship offering. The wood⁶ has been piled up under the pot and the pot has been brought to a nice simmer.⁷

Thus far the expectations of the audience have been moved in a positive direction. But in a classic twist, typical of the genre of parable, what ought to be a tasty sacred meal is, in fact, a foul, profane mess. The "choice pieces" and "the best of these bones" from the "pick of the flock" (24:4–5) turn out to be nothing but defiled filth (hel'ātâ, 24:6). This filth that is inside her will not "come out" (yāṣā'; 24:6; NIV, "go away"), a phrase that has a double meaning. In terms of the imagery of the pot, the filth that will not come out reflects the frustration of a burned-on mess that cannot be removed. On the level of the metaphorical meaning, "come out" is precisely what Jerusalem's inhabitants hope to do at the end of the siege.

As in chapter 11, however, the pot will not protect them; they have defiled the city by their evil and so they (the filth) will not come out from her safely. Their only exit from the pot will be when they are "brought out"

(Hiphil of $y\bar{a}s\bar{a}$) for judgment (24:6; cf. 11:9). Nor will this judgment be partial, with some selected to die and some to live, as when the lot was cast over the two goats on the Day of Atonement, with one chosen for the altar and the other to be driven off into the desert (Lev. 16:8). No lots will be cast over the pot, for all the meat is destined for the same end, reprobation (Ezek. 24:6). There will be no escape.

The blood Jerusalem has shed in her midst is left uncovered, poured out on a bare rock rather than on the ground (24:7). Covering the blood with earth (Lev. 17:13) was required for the blood of all animals slaughtered for meat in Deuteronomy 12:16, 24. Blood left exposed would provoke the wrath of God, so their action was nothing less than a deliberate act of sacrilege. Like the blood of Abel, the blood of the innocent victims of the bloody city cries out for justice, and in consequence Jerusalem's blood will also be poured out uncovered (Ezek. 24:8).

Returning to the imagery of the pot, the Lord declares: "Heap on the wood and kindle the fire. Cook the meat well, removing the broth; and let the bones be charred" (24:10). The empty pot is now transformed into a kind of refiner's furnace in a final attempt to try to melt away the impurities (24:11), as in 22:20–22. But once again, all efforts to remove the defilement have proved ineffective. God's wrath must be satisfied on Jerusalem if she is ever to be clean again (24:13), and it is time for that definitive final action to begin. The time for words has ended; now it is time for deeds (24:14).

The Death of Ezekiel's Wife (24:15–27)

THE SECOND HALF of the chapter shows that the oracle of painful destruction is not delivered from the safety of an armchair in distant Babylon. The sword that is going to strike Jerusalem first strikes the prophet himself in the most painful and personal of his prophetic sign-acts. His own wife, the delight of his eyes, is suddenly taken from him (24:16). This is no random turn of fate, but a sudden stroke directly from God. Yet Ezekiel is not permitted to mourn publicly in the traditional ways, by lamentation and tears, disheveled clothing, and special food (24:17). All he can do is "groan quietly," that is, mourn in privacy and isolation without the usual rites invoking social solidarity and sympathy. Outwardly, he is to behave as if nothing has happened.

This strange behavior is to be a sign to the people of the significance of what is to come (24:24). The temple in Jerusalem was their pride and joy; it had become as precious to the Jerusalemites as the closest of relations (24:21). This building, the delight of their eyes, will be desecrated by God. It will be destroyed along with the sons and daughters whom the exiles had left behind. Yet the people will not weep or wail or mourn publicly for the temple (24:22). This is not because of any absence of grief on their part, but because in the face of such a devastating, all-encompassing judgment, the usual social structures of mourning rites will be overwhelmed. The normal channels of community support will be gone in the face of such universal loss; only inward grief will be possible (24:23).

But in the deepest depths of the gloom comes hope of a turning point in Judah's fortunes. On the very day when the blow falls on Ezekiel's compatriots, when the news of the fall of Jerusalem is confirmed by a fugitive, Ezekiel's lips will be opened and he will be dumb no more (24:27). This dumbness was imposed on him at the outset of his ministry (see 3:26). He was thereby unable to intercede for the people, indeed, unable to speak anything at all except words of judgment. But a time is coming when his dumbness will be removed. With the destruction of Jerusalem, his words of judgment for the city will come to an end; their time will be complete.

Here ends the first lesson, we might say—the lesson of inevitable and incredible judgment poured out on sinners. The prophet's dumbness will be ended, and God's favor will once again be extended toward his people. This promise marks a shift in the nature of Ezekiel's proclamation. In the chapters that follow, it will be time for the prophet to speak words of judgment on the surrounding nations, Israel's enemies (chs. 25–32), and then, when the promise of the removal of dumbness is fulfilled (ch. 33), words of hope to God's chosen people (chs. 34–48).

Bridging Contexts

MEAT AND BLOOD. Filthy pots encrusted with burnt food are familiar to all places and times. Even modern technology has produced little answer to the basic problem; in my experience, the "potscrubber" cycle on the average dishwasher is a hopelessly over-optimistic designation. Old-fashioned

elbow grease is required to try and shift the carbonated remains of serious culinary disasters, and even then sometimes all efforts are in vain.

But the moral and cultic dimensions of the intended meal of Ezekiel 24 may easily be lost on us. We are used to eating meat as a daily experience, unless we are vegetarian. In an ancient culture, however, unless you were exceptionally wealthy, eating meat was a rare experience, usually associated with a sacrifice. On this occasion, Jerusalem's inhabitants are themselves the sacrifice, but the end result is unfit for consumption because of the city's defilement. All that is produced at the end of the fiery trial is a defiled pot, filled with a blackened mess, which even the most extreme measures cannot cleanse.

The concern to handle blood appropriately is also rather distant from us. Blood was regarded as a peculiarly sacred liquid in Israel. It contained the life of the creature (Lev. 17:11) and in consequence had to be disposed of properly. If it was the blood of a clean animal, slaughtered as a sacrifice, it was poured out beside the altar (Deut. 12:27). If it was the blood of a profane animal, slaughtered for meat, it was to be poured out on the ground (12:16, 24) and covered with earth (Lev. 17:13). In this way, proper respect was shown for the agent of animate life.

In its original intention, blood was a taboo that emphasized Israel's calling to be "pro-life" in the fullest sense. But Jerusalem had proved careless about bloodshed, even the shedding of human blood. It was a place where life was cheap. Her inhabitants had neglected their responsibility to take seriously the requirement of Genesis 9:6, that human bloodshed be regarded as a crime of utmost seriousness, because of the nature of human beings as created in the image of God. In consequence, her blood also would be shed by God without pity and her life held to be cheap.

The hidden wisdom of God's set purposes. Much more problematic for the contemporary reader is the death of Ezekiel's wife and his prohibition from mourning. On the one hand, the conception is prevalent among Christians that "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." Even though we may steer clear of its excesses, the health and wealth gospel ("God loves you and wants to give you a Cadillac and a mansion by the Country Club") still influences our thinking. We tend to believe that God's loving plan for our lives must surely include reasonable health, a job, a spouse, and a decent standard of living. If any of these things are absent

from our lives, we tend to place the responsibility not on God but on the forces of evil in the world. God wants us to have these things, we theorize, but we are caught in the crossfire of the cosmic battle.

Nowhere in his Word does God promise us such an easy ride through life. Nor does he pass off responsibility on others. He is the sovereign Lord, which means that even on the battleground, the buck stops with him. Ezekiel's wife dies not because God is powerless to prevent such a thing happening, but because God has a significant purpose to accomplish through that "evil" also. It is a painful providence for the prophet to bear, but nonetheless he must receive this bitter cup too from the hand of his loving Father. As Job, another Old Testament figure equally tormented by God, put it so succinctly: "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" (Job 2:10).

That God takes such dramatic action to highlight the situation is a measure of the seriousness of Judah's sin and the pain level of the coming judgment—both for Judah and for Judah's God. But what God asks his people to undergo for his sake is no more than what he himself is willing to go through for their sake. His beloved Son, Jesus, is nailed to the cross, the ultimate act of wicked men in consort together, but this itself is nothing other than God's "set purpose" (Acts 2:23). God has the right to do with his creatures as he sees fit. It may not have been the course of events we would have chosen, but that is hardly the point. The point is that God's purposes are determined with a wisdom that is above our wisdom, on the basis of thoughts that are above our thoughts. Submitting to the will of such a good God, who did not spare his own Son but freely gave him up for us, is no stoic fatalism but the freeing dependence of a trusting child.

Ancient mourning patterns. But how could God ask Ezekiel not to mourn for his wife? Isn't this an inhuman demand? Again, our unfamiliarity with the ancient culture leads us to undue psychologizing. In fact, what God asks of Ezekiel is hardly a unique occurrence. As a priest, Ezekiel would have been familiar with the restrictions on public mourning for priests in active service prescribed in Leviticus 21. A priest was not permitted to make himself ritually unclean—as formal mourning would require—for any except the closest of his relatives (21:1–4), while the high priest was not even permitted to mourn for his father or mother (21:11). Similarly, after the deaths of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10, their father Aaron and their

brothers Eleazar and Ithamar were forbidden to mourn for them, even though the rest of Israel could (10:6).

That does not mean that they could not feel the pain of the loss in their hearts—undoubtedly they would have—but public mourning was not permitted for the sacred person. Thus what the Lord asks of Ezekiel is not an unfeeling psychological imposition ("your wife whom you love will die and you must pretend nothing has happened") but simply a refraining from the normal social customs. His behavior was certainly regarded as odd, so that the people ask him why he is acting in this way (24:19), but it was not inhuman.

Contemporary Significance

THE CERTAINTY OF God's just judgment. When judgment comes it will always be unexpected, no matter how clearly and often God's messengers have warned of its coming. So it was in the case of Jerusalem. Ezekiel had warned repeatedly of its certain doom, and now he speaks for the final time before that doom was realized. The fire was now kindled, ready to consume the contaminated mess that filled Jerusalem. This fire would not purify the inhabitants of the city, for they were beyond such help. It was designed simply to destroy.

What has this ancient history to do with us? The fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. acts as a picture of the ultimate destruction of the world. Though the scoffers may doubt that such a day of the Lord will ever happen, seeing the delay on God's part as evidence that judgment will never come (2 Peter 3:3–4), God's wrath will be poured out on the world in due season. It will come like a thief in the night (3:10), and the visible universe will disappear. God's patience, long-suffering though it is, will ultimately be exhausted, and the fire of his wrath will be poured out on the world.

Why? It is because there is no other suitable means for dealing with recalcitrant, impenitent sinners. Justice must ultimately be done, and it will be. As Abraham put it in Genesis 18:25, "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" Indeed he will, and the end result will be destruction for the world, as it was for Sodom and Gomorrah. The purpose of this fiery conflagration is not the purification of the wicked. Having refused to be cleansed (Ezek. 24:13), now God's people have nothing to expect but

payment in full for what their actions deserve, which is God's wrath poured out without pity or holding back (24:14).

Living in the light of God's judgment. Is this just an "Old Testament" perspective on God that is out of step with the fullness of "New Testament" revelation of God's love? Not at all. The writer to the Hebrews warns of the fearful fate that awaits anyone who turns his or her back on the revelation of God in Christ:

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Heb. 10:26–31)

In the face of this fearful prospect, how should we then live? Unquestionably, the passing away of this present age should be the dominant reality in our thinking. As Paul tells the Corinthians, this knowledge should affect our attitudes to all our relationships, our emotions, and our possessions.

What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them.

For this world in its present form is passing away. (1 Cor. 7:29–31)

There will come a day for all of us as individuals and for this world as a whole when "time" will be called on mercy and God's wrath will be let loose. In the meantime we live as Ezekiel did, as men and women under orders. We have been commissioned for the battle, and even the most precious things we possess here on earth we have merely as stewards. We do not own our children, or our wives, or even our own bodies. Bearing God's message to the world can be a costly business for us, just as it was for Ezekiel. This level of commitment is something that the world finds hard to understand.

The fact that Hollywood fails to grasp this level of self-giving was graphically demonstrated to me by a scene in the film *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*. In this scene, a missionary to South America was depicted burying his only child, who had died of blackwater fever. As the rain came pouring down, he cried out to the heavens, "I didn't give my permission!" Though there may be those whose faith has been shaken to the core by the costly nature of missionary service, the history of centuries of Christian martyr-witnesses¹² is that over and over again Christians *have* given God "permission"—as if such permission were required! As Martin Luther put it in his great hymn:

And though they take my life, goods, honor, children, wife,
Yet is their profit small: these things shall vanish all
The city of God remaineth.

Nor is it simply missionaries who are mere stewards of the things of this world. The same is true for all of us who name the name of Christ. God has the right at any moment to take from any of us the things that we hold dearest of all in this world. After all, he created both them and us. But more profoundly still, God has the right because he was willing to give up into the hands of sinful people the delight of his eyes, his only Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. He "gave his permission" for Jesus to be beaten and tortured and mocked. What is more, as Jesus hung on that cross, God himself did not

show him mercy but instead poured out the full weight of his wrath over our sins on him. The consuming fire of God's wrath against sin was kindled on Jesus, without pity or holding back.

God and the cross of his Son. Yet just as the deepest night for Jerusalem is the beginning of the end of God's wrath on his people and the turning point to hope in Ezekiel's message, so also the death of Jesus Christ on the cross is the turning point in the history of redemption. The blackness of Good Friday causes the light of Easter Sunday to break out with fresh power for Christ's disciples. The taking away of their Lord, the delight of their eyes, to lay him in a tomb, paradoxically, is the means by which they may be enabled to enjoy him forever.

Since God did not spare his own Son, surely he has the right to ask us not to spare even the delight of our eyes, whatever that is. We should be willing to give it up freely for the sake of spreading the good news and for the sake of the glory of this great God. Nor is it enough merely to be willing; sometimes, God actually takes from us that which is most precious to us. In those moments, as we are enabled by his grace to say, "Not my will, but yours be done, Lord," we become living signs to the world around us of God's grace and glory. We become living demonstrations of the fact that we do not regard God as our accomplice, whose job is to ensure that we live comfortable and fulfilling lives. Rather, he is our Lord, who has bought us with a price and owns us and everything we have. Moreover, we do not mourn as the world mourns, for in the midst of our sadness and real sense of painful loss, we know the assurance that just as our Lord has risen, so also will all his people.

But the cross also reminds us of the certainty of judgment on all who refuse its offer of life. It is this reality that lends urgency to our proclamation of the gospel. For us there is still time. The end of the world has not yet been pronounced. Our tongues have not been silenced. Far from it, we have been given a gospel to share with every creature under heaven that there is one name given to people by which they may yet be saved, the name of Jesus Christ. We have been commanded to preach the good news to all freely, that many may come to Christ and experience his forgiveness and mercy. However, we must never forget that the time we have been given is not unlimited, and the final judgment announced repeatedly in the

Scriptures will one day become a reality—a joyful reality for all who are in Christ, but a fearful reality for those who remain outside.

Ezekiel 25

THE WORD OF THE LORD came to me: 2"Son of man, set your face against the Ammonites and prophesy against them. ³Say to them, 'Hear the word of the Sovereign LORD. This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Because you said "Aha!" over my sanctuary when it was desecrated and over the land of Israel when it was laid waste and over the people of Judah when they went into exile, 4therefore I am going to give you to the people of the East as a possession. They will set up their camps and pitch their tents among you; they will eat your fruit and drink your milk. ⁵I will turn Rabbah into a pasture for camels and Ammon into a resting place for sheep. Then you will know that I am the LORD. ⁶For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Because you have clapped your hands and stamped your feet, rejoicing with all the malice of your heart against the land of Israel, ⁷therefore I will stretch out my hand against you and give you as plunder to the nations. I will cut you off from the nations and exterminate you from the countries. I will destroy you, and you will know that I am the LORD."

8"This is what the Sovereign LORD says:
'Because Moab and Seir said, "Look, the house of Judah has become like all the other nations,"

9therefore I will expose the flank of Moab, beginning at its frontier towns—Beth Jeshimoth, Baal Meon and Kiriathaim—the glory of that land. 10 will give Moab along with the Ammonites to the people of the East as a possession, so that the Ammonites will not be remembered among the nations; 11 and I will inflict punishment on Moab. Then they will know that I am the LORD.'"

¹²"This is what the Sovereign LORD says: 'Because Edom took revenge on the house of Judah and became very guilty by doing so, ¹³therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will stretch out my hand against Edom and kill its men and their animals. I will lay it waste, and from Teman to Dedan they will fall by the sword. ¹⁴I will take vengeance on Edom by the hand of my people Israel, and they will deal with Edom in accordance with my anger and my wrath; they will know my vengeance, declares the Sovereign LORD.'"

¹⁵"This is what the Sovereign LORD says: 'Because the Philistines acted in vengeance and took revenge with malice in their hearts, and with ancient hostility sought to destroy Judah, ¹⁶therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am about to stretch out my hand against the Philistines, and I will cut off the Kerethites and destroy those remaining along the coast. ¹⁷I will carry out great vengeance on them and punish them in my wrath. Then they will know that I am the LORD, when I take vengeance on them.'"

Original Meaning

WITH THIS CHAPTER, we move into a new section of Ezekiel's prophecy: a series of oracles against the surrounding nations (chs. 25–32). They are arranged as a series of six oracles addressed to Judah's immediate neighbors (chs. 25–29, the first four in ch. 25), followed by a climactic seventh oracle against the traditional enemy, Egypt (chs. 30–32). The nations around Judah are addressed in clockwise order, starting with Ammon in the Transjordan to the east of the northern kingdom of Israel, and moving south to the other Transjordanian foes, Moab and Edom. After that, the prophet turns his attention west to Philistia in the southern coastal plain and then north to the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon.

Oracles against foreign nations are a common genre in the prophets and typically include a direct address by God to the nation concerned, charges of arrogant attitudes and/or actions (esp. against Israel), and a prediction of the nation's doom.² All of these elements are found in classical form in the oracle against Ammon (25:1–7).

In this oracle the Lord tells the prophet to set his face toward the Ammonites and prophesy against them (25:2), charging them with rejoicing over Judah's downfall. They exulted in noisy triumph, saying "Aha!" (he hah, the ancient equivalent of cheering) when the sanctuary was desecrated, the land of Israel laid waste, and the people of Judah exiled (25:3). Instead of being appalled at the tragedy that had overcome the sacred place, the holy land, and the chosen people, they regarded their destruction as a cause for celebration. They saw it as proof positive that the triangular relationship between the nation of Israel, her land, and her deity was broken forever. Judah's fall demonstrated to them the superiority of their gods over Yahweh. Hands, feet, and inner emotions were all united in celebration of the Ammonites' hatred of Israel (25:6).4

Because of that attitude, the Ammonites too would experience judgment. Their own land would be laid waste, given to invaders from the East, a perpetual threat for those who inhabited the towns of the Transjordan (25:4). Their produce would be eaten by others and their people cut off, exterminated, and destroyed—a threefold fate to match their threefold rejoicing (25:4, 7).

As a result of this judgment the Ammonites "will know that I am the LORD" (25:7). This recognition formula, which occurs over sixty times in Ezekiel as a whole, is a dominant theme in these foreign nation oracles. The nations will recognize the Lord's sovereignty when he acts to judge not only his own people but them as well. In so doing, he will demonstrate that he is the only one with power to judge or to deliver; in the face of the Lord's fury, their gods are impotent to save them.

The oracle against Moab (25:8–11) charges them with saying, "Look, the house of Judah has become like all the other nations" (v. 8). The irony is that there was not a little truth in that statement: Judah had indeed in large measure become like the nations in the way she lived, giving herself over to idolatry (20:32). But it could never be true in the sense in which Moab had intended, so that this statement is nothing short of blasphemy on her lips.

They meant, "Judah's fall demonstrates that her claims to elect status by the Lord are worthless; she is a reject nation, thrown onto the scrap heap of history along with her god." Instead, it is Moab who will be utterly destroyed, along with Ammon. They are the ones who will be left unremembered on the stage of world history, along with their gods, thus demonstrating the reality and uniqueness of the Lord's existence and sovereign power to act (25:10).

The Edomites (25:12–14) seem not merely to have gloated over the downfall of Judah but to have actively participated in it. The brief statement of verse 12 that "Edom took revenge on the house of Judah" is fleshed out in more detail in the book of Obadiah. There Edom is accused of aiding and abetting the Babylonians, seizing Judah's wealth, cutting down the fugitives, and handing over the survivors (Obad. 11–14). Although they were from a biblical perspective close kin of the Israelites (Num. 20:14–15; Deut. 23:7–8), they had no compassion on their brothers. Moreover, instead of the Lord's judgment on his people putting the fear of Israel's God into their neighbors, they viewed it simply as an opportunity for personal gain and the settling of old scores. The result of their seeking revenge on Judah, however, will be God's execution of vengeance on them, using his own people to do so (Ezek. 25:14).

In 25:15–17 the Philistines are likewise charged with trying to settle old scores, taking revenge with malice in their hearts, and seeking to work out their "ancient hostility" (lit., "eternal enmity") toward Israel in the destruction of the chosen people. They too will experience the vengeance of God: The Kerethites will be cut off (Kereth sounds like $k\bar{a}rat$, the Hebrew word for "cut off") and the Philistines destroyed. It will be vengeance for vengeance. Then they too will recognize the Lord's sovereign power (25:17).

Bridging Contexts

WHY SHOULD A PROPHET who has spent so much time addressing the sins of his own people suddenly turn around and address the surrounding nations? Was it any of his business what these other nations thought and did? Even if the prophet had made it his business, what does it concern us, especially when the nations addressed have long since crumbled into the dust? What

possible relevance could these chapters have for the twentieth-century reader? In practice, if not in theory, these chapters tend to be bracketed off and ignored in our thinking about the book of Ezekiel. If the book as a whole is rarely preached, that is doubly true of the oracles against the nations.

Intended audience and message. One answer to the question of relevance might be to see the prophet as a kind of international diplomat, a one-man precursor of the United Nations, addressing war crimes on a transnational level. The problem with that approach, however, is that there is no evidence that these oracles were actually delivered to the nations addressed or were ever intended to be. The real audience for these oracles is the Judean listener, not the putative listener in the nation addressed.

So what message is contained in these foreign nation oracles for the Judean listener? (1) They are being assured that God does not operate on a double standard, whereby he judges only Israel's sins while the nations are free to behave as they like. Judgment may begin with the house of God, but it doesn't end there. The outpouring of God's wrath extends not simply to the rebels in his own house but also to all those who refuse to recognize his sovereignty. They too must come to "know that I am the LORD"; that is, they must and will ultimately acknowledge that he is the only true God, the one who holds the nations in the palm of his hand, who raises up kingdoms and brings them down again according to his own good pleasure (cf. Isa. 40:15–24).

(2) In spite of the outpouring of God's wrath on his people, they nonetheless remain his people, who are infinitely precious to him. It is noteworthy that the charge leveled against each of the foreign nations in Ezekiel 25 is that they have persecuted or insulted God's chosen people, and thereby insulted God. To take God's people lightly is never a safe thing to do in the Old Testament. In spite of the pattern of sin among Abraham's offspring, God's word to Abraham was still effective: "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:3). Those who rejoice over Israel's downfall—even over her downfall at the hands of the Lord himself—are simply inviting a curse on their own heads, a curse that Ezekiel pronounces effective.

(3) Ezekiel's Judean hearers are reminded that God has his own consistent designs behind all the events of history, the prime purpose of which is to bring glory to himself. Judgment will fall on these nations who mock and abuse Judah in her hour of distress for the same reason that it fell originally on Judah herself: The Lord will thereby be recognized as a powerful and holy God, who acts in and through history.

This consistency of design on God's part is itself a message of encouragement to God's people. The one who said, "Whoever curses you I will curse," is the same one who said, "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you." If the first statement is still operative, then so also is the second. The fact that this goal had not yet been achieved indicated to the people of Judah that God's purposes were not yet at an end as far as their nation was concerned, no matter how bleak her future outlook may have seemed from a human perspective.

Contemporary Significance

SATAN'S STRATEGIES. The assaults of Satan on the church come in a number of different forms. Essentially, however, they boil down to three basic strategies: persecution, seduction, and deception. When he adopts the strategy of persecution, Satan appears as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). But he can also just as easily dress himself as an angel of light, seeking to deceive God's people (2 Cor. 11:14), or he can utilize the Great Prostitute to seduce God's people (Rev. 18). All three of these strategies have been at work in his assault on Judah through the surrounding nations, as we will see in the next few chapters, and the oracles against the foreign nations give God's answers to Satan's assaults in order to fortify his people.

The nations immediately surrounding Judah, which are the focus in Ezekiel 25, have been Satan's willing tools in persecuting God's people. Taking advantage of God's acts of judgment, they rejoiced at her downfall and made it worse. God's answer to his people's cry of "How long, Sovereign Lord?" (cf. Rev. 6:10) is a declaration of judgment on the persecutors. The blood of the martyrs cries out for justice, and justice it will receive. The message to the church or the Christian undergoing persecution is that God sees what is happening and in due season will act and judge.

The certainty of judgment on those who lift a finger against God's elect applies not merely to Satan's human agents but to the spiritual forces of evil as well. They will ultimately be thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where they will be tormented day and night forever (Rev. 20:10). Such an eternal punishment is a fitting end for Satan, the one whose "eternal enmity" toward God and his people finds merely a faint echo in the "eternal enmity" between the Philistines and Israel (Ezek. 25:15).

God's delay in judgment. But if God will ultimately act to break the teeth of the wicked, why does he wait so long? Why does he not immediately intervene to bring on them the judgment they deserve, just as he acted to judge Jerusalem? Sometimes, of course, he does, as in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, but those cases seem to be the exception rather than the rule. One answer to the question of why God delays is so that he may show mercy even to the wicked. The persecutors themselves may yet be shown mercy. Thus Peter answers those who accuse God of tardiness in keeping his promises of justice by the assertion that "[God] is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). God delays the coming of judgment so that Saul the persecutor can be turned into Paul the apostle.

However, the display of God's mercy is not the only reason for his delay. The persecution of the church and the martyrdom of Christians is not simply a means to an end—a way of strengthening the church and bringing about conversions—it is an end in itself. Simply put, martyrs bring glory to God as they lay down their lives. As people freely give up their lives in the service of the gospel, they demonstrate that, for them at least, the Lord is God. He is more precious to them than life itself. In some cases, persecution may strengthen the church. In others, it may seem to succeed in stamping it out.8 But in every case, it brings about a testimony to the lordship of Jesus Christ. That testimony may be accepted or rejected by the persecutors here and now. But ultimately God will not be ashamed to be known as the God of those who have suffered for him, and the knowledge of his universal lordship will then be universally recognized even by those who sought unremittingly here on earth to stamp that knowledge out.

A warning. However, it may also be that in some cases we fill the role of the surrounding nations rather than that of God's suffering people. For a common theme in God's accusation of the nations is that they rejoiced at the divine judgment falling on others. Perhaps we too have been heedless or even happy when our opponents have apparently received their "comeuppance" at the hands of God, whether those opponents be inside or outside the Christian community. We have perhaps been secretly, or not so secretly, glad over the fall of prominent televangelists; some have even gleefully proclaimed that the AIDS virus is a judgment from God against homosexuals.

God's judgment is real in history as well as beyond history, but it should never be contemplated lightly. We would do well to remember the words of Jesus that the measure we use in judging others will be the same one used on us (Luke 6:38). Rather, with reverent fear and trembling before the awful reality of the judgment of God, we should seek to persuade all people to flee the wrath to come (2 Cor. 5:10–11).

Ezekiel 26–27

IN THE ELEVENTH YEAR, on the first day of the month, the word of the LORD came to me: ²"Son of man, because Tyre has said of Jerusalem, 'Aha! The gate to the nations is broken, and its doors have swung open to me; now that she lies in ruins I will prosper,' ³therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against you, O Tyre, and I will bring many nations against you, like the sea casting up its waves. ⁴They will destroy the walls of Tyre and pull down her towers; I will scrape away her rubble and make her a bare rock. ⁵Out in the sea she will become a place to spread fishnets, for I have spoken, declares the Sovereign LORD. She will become plunder for the nations, ⁶ and her settlements on the mainland will be ravaged by the sword. Then they will know that I am the LORD.

7"For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: From the north I am going to bring against Tyre Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, king of kings, with horses and chariots, with horsemen and a great army. 8He will ravage your settlements on the mainland with the sword; he will set up siege works against you, build a ramp up to your walls and raise his shields against you. ⁹He will direct the blows of his battering rams against your walls and demolish your towers with his weapons. ¹⁰His horses will be so many that they will cover you with dust. Your walls will tremble at the noise of the war horses, wagons and chariots when he enters your gates as men enter a city whose walls have been broken through. ¹¹The hoofs of his horses will trample all your streets; he will kill your people with the sword, and your strong pillars will fall to the ground. ¹²They will plunder

your wealth and loot your merchandise; they will break down your walls and demolish your fine houses and throw your stones, timber and rubble into the sea. ¹³I will put an end to your noisy songs, and the music of your harps will be heard no more. ¹⁴I will make you a bare rock, and you will become a place to spread fishnets. You will never be rebuilt, for I the LORD have spoken, declares the Sovereign LORD.

15"This is what the Sovereign LORD says to Tyre: Will not the coastlands tremble at the sound of your fall, when the wounded groan and the slaughter takes place in you? ¹⁶Then all the princes of the coast will step down from their thrones and lay aside their robes and take off their embroidered garments. Clothed with terror, they will sit on the ground, trembling every moment, appalled at you. ¹⁷Then they will take up a lament concerning you and say to you:

"'How you are destroyed, O city of renown, peopled by men of the sea!
You were a power on the seas, you and your citizens; you put your terror on all who lived there.

18 Now the coastlands tremble on the day of your fall; the islands in the sea are terrified at your collapse.'

¹⁹"This is what the Sovereign LORD says: When I make you a desolate city, like cities no longer inhabited, and when I bring the ocean depths over you and its vast waters cover you, ²⁰then I will bring you down with those who go down to the pit, to the people of long ago. I will make you dwell in the earth

below, as in ancient ruins, with those who go down to the pit, and you will not return or take your place in the land of the living. ²¹I will bring you to a horrible end and you will be no more. You will be sought, but you will never again be found, declares the Sovereign LORD."

^{27:1}The word of the LORD came to me: ²"Son of man, take up a lament concerning Tyre. ³Say to Tyre, situated at the gateway to the sea, merchant of peoples on many coasts, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

" 'You say, O Tyre,

"I am perfect in beauty."

⁴Your domain was on the high seas; your builders brought your beauty to perfection.

⁵They made all your timbers of pine trees from Senir; they took a cedar from Lebanon to make a mast for you.

⁶Of oaks from Bashan they made your oars;

of cypress wood from the coasts of Cyprus they made your deck, inlaid with ivory.

⁷Fine embroidered linen from Egypt was your sail

and served as your banner; your awnings were of blue and purple from the coasts of Elishah.

⁸Men of Sidon and Arvad were your oarsmen; your skilled men, O Tyre, were aboard as your seamen.

⁹Veteran craftsmen of Gebal were on board as shipwrights to caulk your seams. All the ships of the sea and their sailors

came alongside to trade for your wares.

10" 'Men of Persia, Lydia and Put served as soldiers in your army.

They hung their shields and helmets on your walls,

bringing you splendor.

¹¹Men of Arvad and Helech manned your walls on every side; men of Gammad

were in your towers.

They hung their shields around your walls; they brought your beauty to perfection.

12" 'Tarshish did business with you because of your great wealth of goods; they exchanged silver, iron, tin and lead for your merchandise.

¹³" 'Greece, Tubal and Meshech traded with you; they exchanged slaves and articles of bronze for your wares.

14" 'Men of Beth Togarmah exchanged work horses, war horses and mules for your merchandise.

15" 'The men of Rhodes traded with you, and many coastlands were your customers; they paid you with ivory tusks and ebony.

¹⁶" 'Aram did business with you because of your many products; they exchanged turquoise, purple fabric, embroidered work, fine linen, coral and rubies for your merchandise.

¹⁷" 'Judah and Israel traded with you; they exchanged wheat from Minnith and confections, honey, oil and balm for your wares.

¹⁸" 'Damascus, because of your many products and great wealth of goods, did business with you in wine from Helbon and wool from Zahar.

19" 'Danites and Greeks from Uzal bought your merchandise; they exchanged wrought iron, cassia

and calamus for your wares.

²⁰" 'Dedan traded in saddle blankets with you.

²¹" 'Arabia and all the princes of Kedar were your customers; they did business with you in lambs, rams and goats.

²²" 'The merchants of Sheba and Raamah traded with you; for your merchandise they exchanged the finest of all kinds of spices and precious stones, and gold.

²³" 'Haran, Canneh and Eden and merchants of Sheba, Asshur and Kilmad traded with you. ²⁴In your marketplace they traded with you beautiful garments, blue fabric, embroidered work and multicolored rugs with cords twisted and tightly knotted.

25" 'The ships of Tarshish serve as carriers for your wares. You are filled with heavy cargo in the heart of the sea. ²⁶Your oarsmen take you out to the high seas. But the east wind will break you to pieces in the heart of the sea. ²⁷Your wealth, merchandise and wares, your mariners, seamen and shipwrights, your merchants and all your soldiers, and everyone else on board will sink into the heart of the sea on the day of your shipwreck. ²⁸The shorelands will quake when your seamen cry out. ²⁹All who handle the oars will abandon their ships: the mariners and all the seamen will stand on the shore.

³⁰They will raise their voice and cry bitterly over you; they will sprinkle dust on their heads and roll in ashes.

³¹They will shave their heads because of you and will put on sackcloth.

They will weep over you with anguish of soul and with bitter mourning.

32As they wail and mourn over you, they will take up a lament concerning you:

"Who was ever silenced like Tyre, surrounded by the sea?"

³³When your merchandise went out on the seas, you satisfied many nations;

with your great wealth and your wares you enriched the kings of the earth.

³⁴Now you are shattered by the sea in the depths of the waters; your wares and all your company

have gone down with you.

35All who live in the coastlands are appalled at you; their kings shudder with horror and their faces are distorted with fear.

³⁶The merchants among the nations hiss at you; you have come to a horrible end and will be no more.'"

Original Meaning

IN CONTRAST TO the short oracles against the nations in Ezekiel 25, the oracle against Tyre covers almost three chapters (26:1–28:19). The remainder of chapter 28 is taken up by a brief oracle against Tyre's companion town Sidon (28:20–23) and then an oracle of encouragement to Israel (28:24–26), which draws together the oracles to Israel's immediate neighbors. Rather than study such a large section in one piece, we will

break it into two parts (chs. 26–27 and ch. 28), but because of the style of composition of the oracle we should remember that the three chapters form a single unit. In that way, we will be reminded to see the scope of the whole as well as the significance of the individual parts.

The oracle against Tyre is composed of three distinct but essentially parallel literary panels, each of which ends with the same concluding phrase about Tyre's going down to the realm of the dead: It will come "to a horrible end" (ballahôt) and "will be no more" ('ênēk 'ad-'ôlām; see 26:21; 27:36; 28:19). The purpose of this panel construction is not to present three separate and different oracles but to invite the reader to place the three oracles side by side and see essentially the same message presented in three different ways.

The First Panel (26:2–21)

THE FIRST PANEL is a straightforward prophecy against the city of Tyre. It is introduced by a date, the first day of an unnamed month in the eleventh year (v. 1). This places the oracle close to the fall of Jerusalem, which occurred in the middle of the eleventh year (cf. 40:1). The charge against Tyre is similar to that raised against Judah's other neighbors: She rejoiced when Jerusalem fell, seeing in that event the opportunity for personal gain: "The gate to the nations is broken, and its doors have swung open to me" (26:2). A potential rival for her trading empire has been eliminated, opening up new avenues to prosperity.²

Ezekiel is quick to point out the flaw in Tyre's thinking. The God who brought judgment on Jerusalem is also against Tyre and will judge her in an almost exactly corresponding manner (26:3). Does Tyre hope to become the new meeting place for the nations? The Lord will bring many nations against her (26:3). Did Tyre rejoice to see Jerusalem's doors shattered? Her walls will be destroyed and her towers torn down (26:4). Did Tyre expect to prosper? She will become plunder for the nations (26:5). Point by point, Tyre's positive expectations are turned on their heads.

The assault of the nations on Tyre is described as being like the waves of a stormy sea (26:3), which is a peculiarly apt image for the city of Tyre. It was originally built on a coastal island about a mile long and half a mile wide, whose strength came from its position surrounded by water. These

metaphorical possibilities of Tyre's geographical situation will be utilized to the full in the second panel, where she is described as a great ship.

The second part of the first oracle against Tyre adds specificity to the picture. The general expression "many nations" (26:3) resolves into the specific figure of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon (26:7). The assault and destruction of Tyre is described in great, if rather stereotypical, detail (26:8–12).³ But the end result is exactly the same: Tyre will be reduced to a bare rock, the haunt of local fishermen rather than of long-distance trading vessels (26:5, 14). Her former glory will never be regained (26:14).

The terrible fall of Tyre will have an impact on her maritime trading partners, the "coastlands" or "islands" (26:15). They will tremble and adopt the customs of mourning, with their rulers coming down from their thrones and setting aside their fine robes (26:16), taking up a lament for the fallen city. It will be as if the island city has sunk into the heart of the chaotic "ocean depths" (thôm, 26:19), its inhabitants condemned to "the pit" (bôr, 26:20), never to return again. These are terms with mythical overtones, though as elsewhere in Scripture the mythical symbols have been completely subjugated in a universe under God's control. The "deep" was an element of the primeval chaos that God transformed into cosmos in Genesis 1, while "the pit" was the shadowy underworld of the dead, the nightmare end of those abandoned by God (see Ps. 28:1; 30:3; 88:4; 143:7). Though people seek for Tyre, she will have utterly vanished, sunk by God's torpedoes, never again to be found (Ezek. 26:21).

The Second Panel (27:1–36)

THE SECOND PANEL (27:1–36) proclaims essentially the same message as the first, but in the form of a lament. The lament genre typically contrasts past glory with present loss, and Ezekiel exploits this format to the full. He describes in great detail the glory of Tyre under the metaphor of a majestic ship. She was a legend in her own mind, beautiful to the point of perfection (27:3), created out of the best resources of the surrounding nations. She was fitted out with prime timbers for her construction, fine cloth for her sails and awnings (27:5–7). Her crew had been recruited from the best manpower available: skilled seamen to form her crew, experienced craftsmen to make necessary repairs, and highly trained soldiers to act as

her company of marines (27:8–11b), bringing her beauty to perfection (27:11c). Could there ever have been a more perfect ship?

Nor was her beauty merely cosmetic. The merchant ship Tyre is depicted as a highly efficient business machine, trading in all kinds of costly goods. The seemingly interminable list of her trading partners, whether borrowed from an extant source or modeled after that form, makes clear the astonishing array of her wares. The cargo list seems to be organized by geographic areas, starting with Mediterranean locations and those in Asia Minor (27:12–15) and moving on through Palestinian regions from south to north (27:16–17) to Syria (27:18–19), Arabia (27:20–22), and finally Mesopotamia (27:23–24). By covering all points of the compass and virtually every imaginable precious commodity, the picture is established of Tyre as the commercial crossroads of the world, the Hong Kong of the ancient Near East.

But the paean of praise for her beauty and commercial importance only heightens the tragedy of her downfall. Like the *Titanic*, she fell victim to her own self-propaganda. Her apparent invincibility contains the seeds of her own downfall. She is "filled with heavy cargo in the heart of the sea" (27:25), a description that fits the city Tyre literally as well as the ship Tyre metaphorically. But when the stormy wind blows, the sea that provides the source of the mariner's wealth can easily become an enemy. An east wind (from Babylon) will start to blow, and the mighty vessel will founder with the loss of all hands (27:26–27). The rapidity with which her demise can be described contrasts starkly with the lengthy description of her beauty. Her beauty and security count for nothing when the storm strikes.

As in the first panel, once again those who watch from the sidelines tremble, and a lament is raised for the doomed city. This time those who adopt the customary forms of mourning—weeping, wailing, sackcloth, dust and ashes, shaving their heads—are the sailors and seafaring people in company with the kings of the coastlands and the merchants (27:28–36). Tyre's joy over the destruction of "the gate to the nations" (26:2) is seen to be thoroughly misplaced, for the one who judged Jerusalem will also judge Tyre, the marketplace of the "nations" (27:33, 36). The end result for Tyre is the same as the first panel: Tyre will "come to a horrible end and will be no more" (27:36).

Bridging Contexts

THE GOAL OF TYRE. This oracle against Tyre is distinctively different from the other oracles against the foreign nations. The remainder of the nations immediately surrounding Israel (Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, and—after Tyre—Sidon) set themselves up in opposition to God's people. Tyre, however, thought to substitute herself for God's city, Jerusalem, and take her place. She thought that the downfall of the chosen city was her opportunity to become the center of the universe, "the gate to the nations" (26:2). It was a role for which she seemed admirably naturally gifted, as the oracle and lament make clear. She possessed not only a strategic location but also great beauty and wealth. She was the Hong Kong of the ancient world, a bustling trading city at the crossroads of east and west.

Indeed, in terms of natural advantages, Tyre was far more suited to the description "the gate to the nations" (26:2) than was Jerusalem. Jerusalem may have been poetically described by the psalmist as being "beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth" (Ps. 48:2). However, we should not assume that this is an "objective" description that could equally well have been found on the pages of an ancient *Architectural Digest* as on the pages of Scripture. Jerusalem's beauty was spiritually discerned, based on her election as "the city of our God" (Ps. 48:1). So too was her security, which rested not on the supposed impregnability of being an island, dwelling in the midst of the seas, but rather on the presence of God within her (Ps. 48:3). The result of that indwelling presence is described by the psalmist in an image that matches exactly that of Ezekiel 27: When the kings of the earth gathered against Jerusalem, "you destroyed them like ships of Tarshish shattered by an east wind" (Ps. 48:7).

But the psalmist's confidence must have seemed to the exiles to have been ill-founded. Jerusalem had not survived the assault of the nations, but on the contrary had herself been shattered. Ezekiel had been called to give the reasons for this in the first part of his prophecy: Jerusalem lay under God's judgment for her sins and as a result had been abandoned by his presence. God was no longer within her, which explained her destruction. But in the nature of the case, with the destruction of God's own city, the attractions of her rivals must have increased. It is one thing to proclaim that God is greater than mammon to people who are comfortably off; it is

another to proclaim that to a people who feel themselves to have been abandoned by their God.

The symbolism of the sea. It is to such people that the prophet addresses his oracle against Tyre. To those tempted to be seduced by Tyre's prosperity, he proclaims Tyre's ultimate doom. The city whose strength comes from her location in the heart of the seas will be drowned in the heart of the seas. This is an image far more potent for the ancient reader than for the modern. The sea may impress us with its power when whipped up into a storm, but for the ancient reader it possessed a mythological status as the personification of the forces of chaos that continually opposed the forces of order and threatened to overwhelm them.

In ancient creation narratives, the Sea (Yam) was one of the principal opponents of the gods, who had to be overcome before the world could be established. The Deep ($t^eh\hat{o}m$) appears similarly in Genesis 1, albeit in demythologized form, as the precreation state of void and wilderness that God transforms into a place of order and beauty and life (Gen. 1:2; cf. Ezek. 26:19). In the Psalms, the seas frequently represent the forces of chaos that are ranged against God, though the psalmist affirms that God is mightier than the seas (e.g., Ps. 93:3–4). In the new heavens and new earth there will be no more sea (Rev. 21:1), for all chaos will be finally and permanently overcome.

Therefore, Tyre's fate of foundering like a ship in a great storm, going down with all hands, perhaps carries more affective weight for its original readers than it does for us. The sea was a more emotive image for them than it is for us. Yet even to us, the oracle underlines once more that even the most destructive, out-of-control forces in the world operate under the direct control of God. He is the One who brings many nations against Tyre, "like the sea casting up its waves" (Ezek. 26:3), and natural defenses and strength will avail nothing against God's judgment. The seductive power of wealth is thus defused by showing its ultimate insecurity and final end. Like those who traveled first class on the *Titanic*, with all its unparalleled grandeur, those who place their trust in this world are traveling on a comfortable oneway trip to nowhere. As John Newton put it in one of his greatest hymns:

Fading is the worldling's pleasure, all his boasted pomp and show.

Contemporary Significance

SEDUCED BY SATAN. We mentioned in the comments on chapter 25 that Satan has three basic strategies for undermining the faith of God's people: persecution, seduction, and deception. All three are addressed in Ezekiel's oracles against the foreign nations. Several of Israel's neighbors have acted in a hostile manner towards her, persecuting her in her hour of difficulty, as we saw in chapter 25. But in the form of Tyre, we see especially the second strategy: seduction. The greater space devoted by Ezekiel to addressing this strategy perhaps demonstrates its relative significance as a temptation to his audience.

We would do well similarly to ponder the particular combination of strategies that Satan favors against us and those around us. For those who live in affluent Western culture, seduction is certainly a prominent element in his armory. We should therefore take particular note of the fact that in Revelation 2–3, the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor, the two churches about which Jesus is purely positive are those experiencing persecution. Those about which Jesus is purely negative, by contrast, all face the assault of Satan in the form of seduction. All too often, while persecution purifies, seduction sedates.

The heart of seduction lies in the promise of prosperity and wealth. In the temptations of Jesus, Satan offered him "all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor" if Jesus would simply bow down to him (Matt. 4:8). So too he comes to contemporary people and offers comfort, peace, and security through material prosperity: Get a good job with a good salary and fringe benefits and you'll be set up for life. This is the philosophy adopted by many around us. As the bumper sticker puts it: "He who dies with the most toys wins." Never mind about questions of right or wrong, of ultimate significance or values; do whatever it takes to feel good and to win. That is seduction.

God's answer to Satan's seduction. The answer to seduction is not to offer people a different way to feel better and win more, as some imitation versions of Christianity proclaim. The health and wealth gospel declares

that faith is the key to unlocking your full potential, so that you can have whatever you want here and now. All you have to do is "name it and claim it." In a materialistic society such an approach will always find followers, but it is merely another brand of seduction.

The true answer to seduction is to open people's eyes to the shallowness of the "beauty" on offer. The Great Prostitute of Revelation 17–18, "Babylon," is modeled in many respects after Ezekiel's description of Tyre. She sits on many waters (17:1), she is the ultimate trading nation (18:12–13), and when she falls the kings of the earth and the sailors mourn (18:9, 17). "Babylon" here is a cipher for Rome, and her trump card is wealth and luxury, in short, materialism. She is the front cover of *Cosmopolitan* and *Vogue* rolled into one. However beautiful and powerful Rome may appear, however, the book of Revelation reveals the truth that her beauty is only skin deep and her power is merely temporary. Judgment is coming, which will uncover the true nature of all things and put them into proper perspective.

Today the Great Prostitute lives not in Tyre or Rome, but in Hollywood and along Madison Avenue; her seductive voice speaks not in Latin but with an American accent, drawing the world away from God and towards materialistic excesses. Her power is seen in the fact that the good news of Coca Cola is more widely proclaimed than the good news of Jesus Christ. Consumerism is making disciples in all nations through its seductive charms.

At the heart of seduction, however, is a lie: that what you see is what you get. And Satan, the eternal liar, is skilled at making us see things from their most attractive perspective. Like an artful angler, he hides the hook and shows us only the juicy worm. Not until too late does the fish discover the steel within. So also Satan attempts to seduce us by showing us beautiful things that compete for our attention, hiding the bitter fruit they bear. He offers the pleasures of adultery, hiding the pain of broken relationships that follow. He persuades us that our children can do just as well in day care, while to succeed in our careers requires us to put in long hours at the office or shop. He persuades us that we really "need" a bigger house, a newer car, and more clothes. He counsels us that we should buy now and pay later. Satan's tackle box is well equipped with lures, but the truth in each of these cases is that we will indeed pay later for what we buy now.

How does God wean our hearts from the seductiveness of this world? (1) One way is through what the Puritans would call the "strokes" and "crosses" of life, the ways in which God causes things not to go as we had hoped. Like a good father, God does not allow us to run wild, but graciously disciplines us, sometimes by opening our eyes to see the hook before we bite and sometimes by using the pain of the hook to bring us to our senses. Thomas Boston described the power of a "cross providence" to bring powerful conviction of sin in these terms:

As when one walking heedlessly is suddenly taken ill of a lameness: his going halting the rest of the way convinces him of having made a wrong step; and every new painful step brings it afresh to his mind. So God makes a crook in one's lot, to convince him of some false step he has made or course he has taken.⁵

These are never the pleasant experiences of our spiritual walk, but as the writer to the Hebrews reminds us, such discipline "produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:11).

(2) The other way for us to learn to resist the attractiveness of Satan's seduction is to learn to fix our eyes on the truth, on Jesus. If Jerusalem's beauty was spiritually discerned even during its prosperous days, then it was not surprising that many would be seduced away by the apparent beauty of its rival during her humiliation at the time of the Exile. So also there are many today who are unable to discern the beauty of Christ crucified. Their eyes are blinded to the truth. The world still seems to offer far more attractive alternatives than the Son of Man.

But for all her attractiveness, the seductiveness of the Great Prostitute does not deliver long-term satisfaction. For the prostitute and her partners, sex is not an expression of a deep relationship, it is itself the relationship. When the sex is over, so is the relationship. So it is also with the seductive attraction of false worship. The false worshiper bows down to his or her idols—be they sex, power, family, or whatever—and says, "So long as you bless me and give me tangible rewards, I will give you worship in return." It is a fundamentally commercial deal. When idolatry ceases to "work for

you," however, you go out in search of a new idolatry, a more attractive prostitute, who will give you the high you seek. But the true worshiper says with Job, "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him" (Job 13:15). Such worship flows naturally and inevitably from a deep relationship and is not based on calculations of what the worshiper gets in return.

Faithfulness. The irony is that faithfulness is a better deal in the long run than idolatry. Adultery does not pay; the future belongs not to the Great Prostitute but to the Bride of the Lamb. She is the One who will come down from heaven adorned for her marriage to the Lamb. In heaven, the true beauty and splendor of Christ will finally be clear to all, but will be enjoyed only by those whose eyes have been opened by God to the beauty of Christ in his humiliation. They have come to know the grace of God demonstrated to us in this: that he who was rich became poor for us, that we might share his riches; that he who was glorious was humiliated for us, that we might share his glory; that he who was all-powerful became weak, that in him we might become strong. Those who are truly feasting their eyes on the beauty of the true Lamb of God, the Lamb that was slain, will not be so easily seduced by the tawdry imitations Satan offers.

Ezekiel 28

THE WORD OF THE LORD came to me: ²"Son of man, say to the ruler of Tyre, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

"'In the pride of your heart you say, "I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god in the heart of the seas." But you are a man and not a god, though you think you are as wise as a god. ³Are you wiser than Daniel? Is no secret hidden from you? ⁴By your wisdom and understanding you have gained wealth for yourself and amassed gold and silver in your treasuries. ⁵By your great skill in trading you have increased your wealth, and because of your wealth your heart has grown proud.

6" 'Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

"'Because you think you are wise, as wise as a god,

⁷I am going to bring foreigners against you, the most ruthless of nations;

they will draw their swords against your beauty and wisdom

and pierce your shining splendor.

⁸They will bring you down to the pit, and you will die a violent death in the heart of the seas.

⁹Will you then say, "I am a god," in the presence of those who kill you?
You will be but a man, not a god, in the hands of those who slay you.
¹⁰You will die the death of the uncircumcised at the hands of foreigners.

I have spoken, declares the Sovereign LORD.' "

11 The word of the LORD came to me: 12 "Son of man, take up a lament concerning the king of Tyre and say to him: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

"'You were the model of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.

13 You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you: ruby, topaz and emerald, chrysolite, onyx and jasper, sapphire, turquoise and beryl. Your settings and mountings were made of gold;

on the day you were created they were prepared.

¹⁴You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you.

You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones.

¹⁵You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you.

¹⁶Through your widespread trade you were filled with violence, and you sinned.

So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God,

and I expelled you, O guardian cherub, from among the fiery stones. ¹⁷Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor. So I threw you to the earth; I made a spectacle of you before kings. ¹⁸By your many sins and dishonest trade you have desecrated your sanctuaries. So I made a fire come out from you, and it consumed you, and I reduced you to ashes on the ground in the sight of all who were watching. ¹⁹All the nations who knew you are appalled at you; you have come to a horrible end

²⁰The word of the LORD came to me: ²¹"Son of man, set your face against Sidon; prophesy against her ²²and say: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

and will be no more."

" 'I am against you, O Sidon, and I will gain glory within you.
They will know that I am the LORD, when I inflict punishment on her and show myself holy within her.

23I will send a plague upon her and make blood flow in her streets.
The slain will fall within her, with the sword against her on every side.
Then they will know that I am the LORD.

²⁴" 'No longer will the people of Israel have malicious neighbors who are painful briers and

sharp thorns. Then they will know that I am the Sovereign LORD.

I gather the people of Israel from the nations where they have been scattered, I will show myself holy among them in the sight of the nations. Then they will live in their own land, which I gave to my servant Jacob. ²⁶They will live there in safety and will build houses and plant vineyards; they will live in safety when I inflict punishment on all their neighbors who maligned them. Then they will know that I am the LORD their God.'"

Original Meaning

EZEKIEL 28:1–19 COMPLETES what the prophet has to say against Tyre. Then in verses 20–23 Ezekiel prophesies against the sister city of Tyre, namely, Sidon. He closes this chapter with a brief address to the Lord's own people (vv. 24–26).

The Third Panel (28:1–19)

CONTINUING THE THEMES found in the first two panels of Ezekiel's prophecy against Tyre (chs. 26–27), the third panel combines both straightforward prophecy and lament, this time directed at the ruler of Tyre, who in his person and fate acts as a kind of personification of the city. He is accused of overweening pride, of saying in his heart, "I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god in the heart of the seas" (28:2). He claims to exercise the divine authority that comes from sitting on the throne of the gods.²

The evidence on which the king of Tyre rests his claim to the status of a divine being is twofold: his wisdom and his wealth. In the first place, he claims to be as wise as a god, wiser than the ancient hero Danel (28:3). As we pointed out with reference to Ezekiel 14, it is disputed whether this is a reference to the famous biblical character Daniel, or to a person known from the Ugaritic Aqhat epic. The mythical Danel is a character of proverbial wisdom,³ but so also is the biblical figure, and he better fits the description as the one "from whom no secrets are hid," to borrow the

language of the *Book of Common Prayer* (Ezek. 28:3; cf. Dan. 2:21–23, 47; 4:6, 18; 5:12).⁴ The king of Tyre apparently thinks of himself as surpassing this all-time great in the wisdom "Hall of Fame" and achieving levels of wisdom and knowledge that are reserved to the gods. This enormous wisdom, in his estimation, is what has brought him his great wealth. That his treasuries are full of gold and silver is attributed to his skill in trading (Ezek. 28:4–5); thus, along with his wealth his pride has grown enormously (28:5).

The Sovereign Lord will quickly put the king of Tyre in his place. His vaunted wisdom and claimed divine status will not help him when the true God brings the nations against him; they will draw their swords against his wisdom and beauty and quickly cut him down to size (28:6–8). The most objective demonstration of his human status will be his helplessness in the hands of those who capture him as they put him to death (28:8–10). What kind of god is he if he can be so easily slain? Far from being a god, he will go down to "the pit," dying the death of the slain in the chaotic heart of the seas (28:8). Here there is a clear echo of the fate of the city of Tyre itself in Ezekiel 26:19–20.

The king's destiny is underlined in the command to the prophet to raise a lament for the king of Tyre (28:12). A lament presupposes the death of the person concerned, thus emphasizing from the outset his humanity. Yet the lament (with perhaps more than a hint of sarcasm?) in its eulogy appears at the outset to take his claims of divinity seriously. It describes him as a "model of perfection" or, as the Hebrew translates literally, the "very seal of proportion." This phrase seems to identify the king of Tyre as the very epitome of perfection, full of wisdom and consummate in beauty (28:12).

In keeping with his claims of semidivine status, as one who sits on the seat of the gods (Ezek. 28:2), the king of Tyre is described as having been present at the beginning of the world in Eden, the garden of God, adorned with every precious stone (28:13).⁵ He was even anointed as a "guardian cherub" (28:14), one of the heavenly beings described as the Lord's throne-bearers in Ezekiel 1 and 10 and known from the account in Genesis 3 as the guardians of the sacred garden. He had access to the center of the divine presence, being "on the holy mount of God" and walking about among the stones of fire (Ezek. 28:14).⁷ These numerous, if sometimes oblique, references to the creation narrative set up the picture of the king of Tyre as

the first (and therefore foremost) of all men, an Urmensch become Ubermensch (original man become superman). Greater even than Adam, he has not been made "a little lower than angels"; he claims to rank right up there among the divine beings.

But his greatness and privilege as the protological man simply serves to underline the greatness of his fall from grace. This possibility is inherently present in the Edenic imagery. Just as the image of the heavily laden merchant ship in Ezekiel 27 lends itself naturally to the image of the sinking ship, so the image of the Man in Paradise leads almost inevitably to the picture of Paradise Lost. The abundance of his trade brought with it not merely riches but also violence and pride; his "wisdom" became corrupt and led him into wickedness (28:16–17).

This wickedness, and the judgment it subsequently incurred, exposed the pretension of his pride. Far from being a self-sufficient divinity, his humanity and derivative status were laid bare when at the command of the one true God he was banished from the garden and from the presence of God (28:16). Far from being a god, who by a theophany might sanctify a piece of ground as a suitable site for a sanctuary, his very presence had the opposite effect, defiling sanctuaries (28:18). Cast down to the ground, he was made a public spectacle before the kings of the earth and consumed by fire from within (28:18).

The end result of this judgment is that the king of Tyre, like his city, will come to a horrible end and will be no more (26:19). Like the second panel, then, the third panel paints a glorious, hyperbolic picture of Tyre's present splendor. But that present glory merely serves to underline the depth of Tyre's fall when it comes, a fall that will affect both Tyre and her king. When the great ship Tyre sinks, her captain will go down to the depths along with her.

Oracle Against Sidon (28:20–23)

AFTER THE THREE-PANEL depiction of Tyre's judgment comes a brief oracle against Tyre's neighbor, Sidon (Ezek. 28:20–23). There is no particular charge leveled against her; presumably she is included in the general charges of rejoicing in Jerusalem's downfall and profiting from it. But her rejoicing will be short-lived, for she, like the other nations, will find that Judah's God is not to be trifled with. The Lord will gain glory for himself

by executing judgments on Sidon—plague, bloodshed, and the sword on every side (28:22–23). As in the Exodus, he will gain glory from his execution of judgment on his people's foes (Ex. 14:4, 17–18). Then indeed the nations will experience personally the Lord's holiness and power.

This is, in fact, a significant aspect of the judgment on the nations. The power of the Lord's holiness has already been demonstrated in his execution of judgment on his own people. But his faithful love for his people requires him to demonstrate that Jerusalem is not finally cast off. The promise to Abraham that "whoever curses you I will curse" (Gen. 12:3) is still in force.

Address to the Lord's People (28:24–26)

As WE CONCLUDE the circular tour of judgment on Israel's immediate neighbors, the prophet is instructed once again to address the Lord's own people so that they may understand the reason for what they see happening. These words of hope form the central fulcrum for the oracles against the nations, showing that their purpose is to build hope in Ezekiel's immediate audience. The judgments on the nations that the prophet describes are ultimately for Israel's own good, so that when the full regathering of the nation takes place, she may dwell in safety, free from prickly neighbors (28:24).

Indeed, God will demonstrate his holiness—the distinctiveness of his being—not only by judging the nations but also by once again gathering his own people to the Promised Land. He will demonstrate his power by giving them peace and security in the land promised to the patriarchs in the sight of the nations all around (28:25). The people will once again be able to build houses and plant vineyards (28:26), long-term projects that speak of settled security. Then all nations will see that Israel is God's people and he is their God, which has been the goal of his covenant relationship with them from the outset (Ex. 6:7). This point is underlined in the modified version of the recognition formula used. Instead of the usual "then they will know that I am the LORD," the oracle closes, "Then they will know that I am the LORD their God" (Ezek. 28:26). Paradise, which the king of Tyre claimed and lost, may still be regained by God's own people.

A HEAVENLY CONFLICT DEPICTED? This passage has suffered from imaginative exegesis at the hands of the early church fathers, whose ideas have been given renewed currency in some contemporary expositions. These writers interpreted the depiction of Ezekiel 28, along with a similar passage addressed to the king of Babylon in Isaiah 14, as describing literally a heavenly conflict between God and the forces of evil. This conflict resulted in the fall of "Lucifer" and his followers from a primary place in the heavenly realms to the earth.

Such an interpretation ignores the metaphorical context of both passages, however. The king of Tyre is no more literally the first creature, the cherub of the garden, than Tyre itself is literally a merchant ship in Ezekiel 27. These images exploit the possibilities that are inherent in the situation of Tyre as an island or the claims of the king of Tyre to be a divine being in order to show that each image has a dark side. Ships can sink; paradise can be lost. In each case, the perfection of the initial state is magnified to hyperbolic proportions in order to underscore the calamity when it comes.

This means that just as there was never a literal ship that fit the description of the ship Tyre that actually sank (though it is in the nature of ships to sink), so also there need not here be reference to an actual perfect creature exactly matching the description of the guardian cherub, who was cast down to the earth. It is enough that there is a general knowledge of the fact that paradise, the home of the perfect, can be lost, an idea expressed not only in the biblical account of Genesis but in ancient Near Eastern myths. To use a contemporary analogy, the proverb "Pride goes before a fall" depends not on any particular fall, but simply on the fact that it is the general nature of the world in which we live for hybris to bear bitter fruit.

Agents of Satan. Nevertheless, it is also true that the powers that exist in this world do not always act alone. In some cases, they may act as agents of Satan in concerted opposition to Christianity. Jesus speaks of Christians being persecuted and brought before kings and governors for the sake of his name (Luke 21:12). The modern state may arrogate to itself semidivine status, claiming and receiving the ultimate allegiance of all citizens, just as Herod received the worship of the people of Tyre and Sidon (!) in Acts 12:22. In so doing, it is nothing other than a mask for the assaults of Satan on God's people.

But Christians will always own no other king than King Jesus, in the assurance that ultimately his is the name to which every knee will bow. Like the pretensions of the king of Tyre or King Herod, the pride that launches such totalitarian claims will inevitably ultimately be brought low by God. Such confidence in God's ultimate triumph, which is legitimately founded on this passage, is far more important to Christian perseverance than obscure metaphysical speculations about the origins and early history of the evil one.

Contemporary Significance

THE SEDUCTIVE POWER of wisdom. We have already addressed in our discussion of Ezekiel 26–27 the seductive power of material prosperity. What this section adds is the seductive power of wisdom and of power itself. The king of Tyre prided himself on his godlike "wisdom" as being the source of all his material prosperity. We too, in the modern world, are often in awe of the wisdom of "experts."

We live in a culture of specialization and increasing dependence on expertise." When we get sick, we no longer go just to a doctor but to a specialist family practitioner. If it is something serious, then we are immediately referred to a cardiologist or urologist or whichever specialist is appropriate. Even auto mechanics now specialize in particular makes of car or in oil changes or tune-ups. As a result, we have become dependent on the advice of "experts" in every sphere of life, from investments to child-rearing and marriage. We attend their seminars and rely on their expertise, often reassured by their impressive array of credentials.¹²

But the pursuit of wisdom on its own is not necessarily good. It was divine wisdom that the serpent promised our first parents in the garden: "You will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). The offer of autonomous wisdom was a lie, and the result was Paradise Lost. Yet men and women still seek to establish their own wisdom apart from God, whether by listening to an internal voice or seeking the guidance of the experts. In the New Age movement, the trends are often combined as "experts" charge \$500 or more for weekend seminars that promise inner enlightenment, an empowering knowledge of self and the world, through which health, wealth, and wholeness may be attained.

The wisdom of the world may offer a God-like ability to succeed in everything we attempt while living lives free of pain and sickness. It offers a seductively attractive path to those who are suffering physically or otherwise lacking in some area of their lives. The wisdom of the world, however, is foolishness to God (1 Cor. 1:20). For the Christian, wisdom consists neither in consulting the experts nor in seeking inner enlightenment, but in consulting God and in living according to his Word. This way makes no promises of present wealth, health, or ease. The way of God's wisdom, however, is the only safe path back to Paradise Regained.

The seductive power of power. Nor is it enough to avoid being seduced by the wisdom of the world. Christians are also frequently seduced by the power of the world. The powers that be, whether political, intellectual, or economic, frequently oppose the truth of the Scriptures. In many conflicts, the gods of this age seem able to put more battalions onto the field than the God of the Bible. The temptation that faces the church in such situations is to attempt to fight power with power. In response to pagan political agendas, it is easy to get sucked into believing that the only correct response is a Christian political agenda. In response to the power of a consumer culture, many are persuaded that the answer is better marketing for the church.

The love of power can also infiltrate the church. Church leaders or denominational structures can easily be elevated six feet above contradiction. I was once told by a church leader with whom I disagreed over whether a practice was right, "The denomination has decided. What gives you the right to disagree?" The answer to his question (though unfortunately I did not have it on my lips at the time) is that Jesus is our king, not the church, and his wisdom is expressed in the Scriptures. If the Bible says so, I must believe it, no matter what the experts or the powers say. If the Bible denies it, then I may not think so, though all the world agrees. As Martin Luther put it in his famous declaration to the Diet of Worms: "Here I stand. My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I can do no other."

Jesus as the power and wisdom of God. The assurance of Ezekiel 28 is that it is those who take their stand on the Word of God and the wisdom of God who will ultimately stand, not those who kowtow to the wisdom and the powers of this world. Their strength is but a show, no matter how

impressive it appears. It contains within itself the seeds of its own demise. But those who trust in Jesus have built their house on the solid Rock, who is more solid than even the contemporary rock of ages, Tyre.

That fact is true because Jesus Christ is both the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24). The message of the cross may be despised by those who are perishing, because it seems the way of weakness, but in reality it is the power of God (1 Cor. 1:18). The way of weakness that the crucified Christ represents is stronger by far than any human strength. He is the true model of perfection, who was with the Father in the beginning, the exact image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15). He was the one who was actually present in Eden, yet without sin. The king of Tyre might make great boasts of his divine status, but Jesus Christ really is one with the Father (John 10:30). He is the reality to which the king of Tyre blasphemously aspired.

But there was one key similarity between Jesus and the king of Tyre: Both died in humiliation, under the judgment of God. Yet even in this similarity is a crucial difference: Although Jesus was banished from the Father's presence on the cross, in his case the cause was not his pride but ours. Mine was the transgression that deserved the fate of the uncircumcised, under God's curse. His was the payment of the penalty that my desire to "be like God" incurred.

The ultimate destiny of Jesus and the king of Tyre are also radically divergent. The king of Tyre will fall to the underworld, never to return. Jesus has ascended to the right hand of the Father in glory. There he is crowned with many crowns and exalted above all names. What is more, he is united forever to his people, whom he won for himself through his death and resurrection. Therein lies our assurance and our hope. If we are exalted by the world like the king of Tyre, there are no guarantees of our remaining at the top. Those who reject the way of Christ in favor of the wisdom of the world are destined for the pit. But if instead we follow the way of suffering and affliction in company with Jesus, we will also be exalted with him and be with him for all eternity.

Jesus, the second Adam, the eschatological God-man, has paid for our original and actual sin once and for all on the cross. Through his death, he has regained Paradise on our behalf. As a result, we are assured of immortality in him (1 Cor. 15:45–54). Here and now we may only

experience a foretaste, but some day we will experience the fullness of rest and blessing when the Lord reveals himself in the sight of the nations as "the LORD [our] God" (Ezek. 28:26).

Ezekiel 29:1-30:19

In the tenth year, in the tenth month on the twelfth day, the word of the LORD came to me: ²"Son of man, set your face against Pharaoh king of Egypt and prophesy against him and against all Egypt. ³Speak to him and say: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

" 'I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, you great monster lying among your streams. You say, "The Nile is mine; I made it for myself." ⁴But I will put hooks in your jaws and make the fish of your streams stick to vour scales. I will pull you out from among your streams, with all the fish sticking to your scales. ⁵I will leave you in the desert, you and all the fish of your streams. You will fall on the open field and not be gathered or picked up. I will give you as food to the beasts of the earth and the birds of the air.

⁶Then all who live in Egypt will know that I am the LORD.

"'You have been a staff of reed for the house of Israel. ⁷When they grasped you with their hands, you splintered and you tore open their shoulders; when they leaned on you, you broke and their backs were wrenched.

8" 'Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will bring a sword against you and kill your men and their animals. 9Egypt will become a

desolate wasteland. Then they will know that I am the LORD.

"'Because you said, "The Nile is mine; I made it," ¹⁰therefore I am against you and against your streams, and I will make the land of Egypt a ruin and a desolate waste from Migdol to Aswan, as far as the border of Cush. ¹¹No foot of man or animal will pass through it; no one will live there for forty years. ¹²I will make the land of Egypt desolate among devastated lands, and her cities will lie desolate forty years among ruined cities. And I will disperse the Egyptians among the nations and scatter them through the countries.

13" 'Yet this is what the Sovereign LORD says: At the end of forty years I will gather the Egyptians from the nations where they were scattered. ¹⁴I will bring them back from captivity and return them to Upper Egypt, the land of their ancestry. There they will be a lowly kingdom. ¹⁵It will be the lowliest of kingdoms and will never again exalt itself above the other nations. I will make it so weak that it will never again rule over the nations. ¹⁶Egypt will no longer be a source of confidence for the people of Israel but will be a reminder of their sin in turning to her for help. Then they will know that I am the Sovereign LORD.'"

¹⁷In the twenty-seventh year, in the first month on the first day, the word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁸"Son of man, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon drove his army in a hard campaign against Tyre; every head was rubbed bare and every shoulder made raw. Yet he and his army got no reward from the campaign he led against Tyre. ¹⁹Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am going to give Egypt to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and he will carry off its wealth. He will loot and plunder the

land as pay for his army. ²⁰I have given him Egypt as a reward for his efforts because he and his army did it for me, declares the Sovereign LORD.

²¹"On that day I will make a horn grow for the house of Israel, and I will open your mouth among them. Then they will know that I am the LORD."

^{30:1}The word of the LORD came to me: ²"Son of man, prophesy and say: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

"'Wail and say,
"Alas for that day!"

For the day is near,
the day of the LORD is near—
a day of clouds,
a time of doom for the nations.

A sword will come against Egypt,
and anguish will come upon Cush.
When the slain fall in Egypt,
her wealth will be carried away
and her foundations torn down.

⁵Cush and Put, Lydia and all Arabia, Libya and the people of the covenant land will fall by the sword along with Egypt.

6" 'This is what the LORD says:

" 'The allies of Egypt will fall and her proud strength will fail. From Migdol to Aswan they will fall by the sword within her, declares the Sovereign LORD.

7" 'They will be desolate among desolate lands,
and their cities will lie among ruined cities.
8Then they will know that I am the LORD,

when I set fire to Egypt and all her helpers are crushed.

9" 'On that day messengers will go out from me in ships to frighten Cush out of her complacency. Anguish will take hold of them on the day of Egypt's doom, for it is sure to come.

¹⁰" 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

" 'I will put an end to the hordes of Egypt by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon.

¹¹He and his army—the most ruthless of nations

will be brought in to destroy the land.
They will draw their swords against Egypt and fill the land with the slain.

12 I will dry up the streams of the Nile and sell the land to evil men; by the hand of foreigners

I will lay waste the land and everything in it.

I the LORD have spoken.

13" 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

" 'I will destroy the idols and put an end to the images in Memphis. No longer will there be a prince in Egypt, and I will spread fear throughout the land.

¹⁴I will lay waste Upper Egypt, set fire to Zoan and inflict punishment on Thebes.

¹⁵I will pour out my wrath on Pelusium, the stronghold of Egypt, and cut off the hordes of Thebes.

¹⁶I will set fire to Egypt; Pelusium will writhe in agony. Thebes will be taken by storm;
Memphis will be in constant distress.

17The young men of Heliopolis and Bubastis will fall by the sword, and the cities themselves will go into captivity.

18Dark will be the day at Tahpanhes when I break the yoke of Egypt; there her proud strength will come to an end. She will be covered with clouds, and her villages will go into captivity.

19So I will inflict punishment on Egypt, and they will know that I am the LORD.'"

Original Meaning

AFTER THE SIX ORACLES against Israel's immediate neighbors (chs. 25–28), we reach the seventh, climactic oracle, which is delivered against Egypt (chs. 29–32). This oracle is itself made up of seven subunits (29:1–16; 29:17–21; 30:1–19; 30:20–26; 31:1–18; 32:1–16; 32:17–32). Like the substantial oracle against Tyre that preceded it, the word against Egypt addresses both the land of Egypt and its ruler and threatens judgment on both.

The First Oracle (29:1–16)

EZEKIEL 29 OPENS with a word of judgment against Pharaoh, who is addressed under the figure of a great sea monster (tannîn).² This sea monster was a well-known element of ancient Near Eastern mythology, a force of chaos that had to be tamed before the world could be created.³ The prophet Isaiah had already utilized the imagery of the sea monster to describe God's defeat of Egypt at the time of the Exodus (Isa. 51:9), while in Genesis 1:21 the great sea monster appears in demythologized form as simply another of God's creatures.

In Ezekiel, the mythical picture blends with the geographically appropriate image of Pharaoh as a great crocodile, resting secure amid the Nile streams, to give a picture of the ruler of Egypt as a superhuman,

supernatural force of destruction. Thus far, Pharaoh would probably not have disputed the description. According to Egyptian records, the god Amon-Re said to Pharaoh Thutmoses III, "I cause them to see thy majesty as a crocodile, the lord of fear in the water, who cannot be approached." But just as the positive metaphor of the ship of Tyre in full sail lends itself to the negative picture of the ship of Tyre catastrophically wrecked, so also the image of Pharaoh as a powerful crocodile, even one of mythical proportions, lends itself to the picture of Pharaoh as the trapped crocodile, subdued by the Great Hunter. For both the ship and the crocodile, their watery fortress proves to be less than impregnable. Tyre's home "in the midst of the seas" (*betôk hayyām*) was no secure defense, and neither will Pharaoh's abode "in the midst of the Nile/streams" (*betôk ye'ōr*).

Thus, for all Pharaoh's boasts of divine power, claiming to have created for his own purposes the Nile, the source of all of Egypt's prosperity, he will be trapped with hooks like an ordinary crocodile (Ezek. 29:4). He will be brought out into the desert, the place of judgment (20:35), and there executed along with "all the fish of your streams," that is, either the nations allied to him or the members of his armed forces. Their bodies will be left dishonorably exposed to become food for wild animals, rather than being gathered for decent burial. Such a fate was commonly invoked as a curse in ancient Near Eastern treaties.

The reason for this act of judgment becomes clear in verses 6–7. Egypt has been an unstable support, a "staff of reed" to Judah. The term "staff of reed" is an oxymoron: A staff needs to be strong and reliable to support the weight placed on it, while a reed is by definition something thin and fragile (1 Kings 14:15). Egypt's sin was to appear to be a source of military support in Judah's struggle against Babylon, encouraging her to rebel against her overlords. Once the battle was joined, however, she stood at a distance, leaving Judah to her fate.

The image of Egypt as a "splintered reed of a staff" was already used centuries earlier in the Assyrian field commander's speech to Hezekiah's emissaries (2 Kings 18:21; Isa. 36:6). In that instance, it was an unfair and inaccurate assessment of the situation since Hezekiah had placed his trust in a much firmer support, the Lord (2 Kings 18:5). Nevertheless, as a judgment of the political dangers of trusting in Egypt, it was a true statement at most points in Israel's history.⁷

Though the sin of trusting in the staff of reed was primarily Judah's sin, yet the object of that trust is judged along with her. God's people should indeed have known better than to trust in Egypt, but Egypt too is not guiltless for soliciting their trust and then proving dangerously unstable, causing (in the imagery of leaning on an unstable support) their shoulders to become shattered and their hips to totter (Ezek. 29:7). Egypt's arrogant claims to creator status are a contributory factor in Judah's sin (29:9). As a result, she too will be judged by God and turned into an utter devastation, a devastated land in the midst of devastated lands. This total destruction will extend from Migdol on the northeast frontier all the way down to Aswan in the far south (29:10). The whole of Egypt will be uninhabited for forty years (29:11), which is not only the standard length of a generation in biblical terminology but is also the length of the Judean exile Ezekiel had prophesied in 4:6.

To underline the symmetry of Egypt's fate with those who trusted in her, her people will be scattered among the nations and dispersed among the peoples, just like Judah (12:15; 20:23; 22:15). Even more strikingly, they too will be gathered by the Lord from among the nations, brought back from captivity, and returned to the land from which they originated (29:14). But these similarities only serve to highlight the differences in their ultimate fates. Egypt will not be fully restored but merely reestablished as a shadow of her former self, confined to the distant areas of Upper Egypt (29:16). There it will no longer act as a source of temptation for Judah in her foreign policy. In their weakened state, they too will come to an awareness of God's sovereign power. Her "restoration" is not so much an act of grace on the Lord's part for Egypt's sake as it is a reminder of Israel's past faithlessness, which will never again be repeated.

The Second Oracle (29:17–21)

THE SECOND ORACLE in the sequence against Egypt is the latest of all the dated oracles, coming from the beginning of the twenty-seventh year of the Exile (29:17). It recognizes the relative fruitlessness of Nebuchadnezzar's campaign against Tyre, of which Ezekiel had spoken in chapters 26–28. Though the effort expended was great, with both helmet and shield leaving their marks on the relevant parts of the anatomy, the booty achieved at the end of the campaign was minimal (29:18). In compensation, since they

were working for the Lord (29:20), the Lord will give Egypt's wealth as plunder for Nebuchadnezzar's army (29:19).

It has become almost a shibboleth in commentaries to see the purpose of this oracle as Ezekiel's explaining away the failure of his earlier prophecy against Tyre. According to Josephus, Nebuchadnezzar did indeed besiege Tyre for some thirteen years (586–573 B.C.). By the end of that time, Tyre's economic and political importance was destroyed, and the king of Tyre became a vassal of Nebuchadnezzar. The siege appears to have been a success, as Ezekiel had prophesied. However, the material rewards were not, according to Ezekiel, appropriate to the energy expended. It is this imbalance that the Lord now promises to redress.

If the passage had been intended as an apologetic against a failure of literal fulfillment, it is extraordinary that the prophet chooses such a minor part of his prophecy to defend. If he were confronted by literalists, insisting on a word-for-word fulfillment of his prophecy, one would have expected them to press Ezekiel on the major point that Tyre had not actually been reduced to a bare rock (26:4) but was still a viable city, rather than on the minor point that Tyre had not provided significant booty for her captors. In addition, an oracle with such a purpose would belong properly after the Tyre oracles, not in the middle of the oracles against Egypt.

In fact, the purpose of the oracle is quite different." There is no mention as such of any "failure" of an earlier oracle; on the contrary, the essential success of the oracle against Tyre is presupposed. Nebuchadnezzar did indeed, as Ezekiel prophesied, assault Tyre and bring her to ruin. The point being made here is simple: The worker is worthy of his hire, and Nebuchadnezzar is acting as the Lord's worker in his conquests, both of Tyre and Egypt. Just as he had succeeded against Tyre, so also he will succeed against Egypt, and this time he will receive payment in full.

Chapter 29 then closes with a brief oracle that reminds us that Israel remains the central focus of the prophet's interest, even in the oracles against the foreign nations. Commensurate with Egypt's reduction in significance will be a strengthening of the house of Israel. This turn in Israel's fortunes will result both in a recognition of the Lord as the agent of this change and in a recognition that Ezekiel has been the Lord's prophet: The Lord will "open your mouth"; that is, Ezekiel's testimony will be validated (29:21).¹²

The Third Oracle (30:1–19)

In this third oracle, the content of the prophecy of the first oracle (29:1–16) is essentially replayed in the form of a lament. The prophet is instructed to wail and mourn for the coming of the day of the Lord's judgment on Egypt (30:3–4). Egypt's allies, which were mentioned as sharing her downfall in the first oracle under the image of the "fish of your streams" (29:4), now come into focus as distinct nations. Ethiopia (Cush), Libya (Put), Lydia, all Arabia, Cub, and the people of the land in covenant with them will fall along with Egypt (30:5–6). The entire confederacy will be reduced to a shattered and burned ruin (30:6–9), made desolate at the hand of Nebuchadnezzar and his ruthless army (30:10–12). From Memphis, Tahpahnes, and Heliopolis in the north of Egypt to Thebes in the south, the cities of Egypt will be destroyed (30:13–19).

The summary statement in 30:19, "So I will inflict punishment on Egypt, and they will know that I am the LORD," evokes repeated themes of the Exodus narrative, where both "doing judgments" against Egypt (Ex. 6:6; 7:4; 12:12; Num. 33:4) and the knowledge of God (Ex. 7:5; 14:4, 18) are prominent. As in the Exodus, this act of judgment will strike at both the gods of Egypt and their earthly rulers (Ezek. 30:13). In the imagery of the cosmic Day of the Lord, the light will be turned to darkness and the proud strength of Egypt brought to an end (30:18). By this means, God will demonstrate conclusively his existence and power in front of a watching world.

Bridging Contexts

COMFORTING THE AFFLICTED. One of the dangers against which I warn aspiring preachers in our seminary is that of preaching against all the sins with which no one in their congregation struggles. It is relatively easy to warn the heterosexuals about the dangers of homosexuality, the teetotaler about the snare of alcoholism, the politically conservative about the hazards of liberalism, the rigidly orthodox about the perils of false teaching. All of these are indeed real concerns, but insofar as they are not a part of your congregation, to preach against them will merely instill a comfortable sense of "us" versus "them." "We" are those who are righteous, holy and free from sin (at least, from those sins); "they" are the filthy, abhorrent sinners.

Like the Pharisee in the temple, we continually remind God and ourselves of the sins of others, rather than recognizing the reality of our own sins (Luke 18:11). In the meantime, our more subtle sins of pride, self-centeredness, and lack of love may go completely unchallenged.

At first sight, it may appear that the oracle against Egypt falls into this category of sermon. Does it not address someone else's sins and threaten judgment on them, to the exclusion of any interest in Judah's misdeeds? Is Ezekiel selling out his responsibility as a prophet? Those who have read this far through the book will hardly think that a likely scenario. If the preacher's task is both to afflict the comfortable and to comfort the afflicted, few will accuse Ezekiel of unduly sparing the comfortable. But now it is time for Ezekiel to turn to the task of comforting the afflicted. The foreign nation oracles are part of that ministry of comfort.

But how precisely does this oracle against Egypt encourage the exiles of Judah? The first way is by assuring them of God's continuing concern for his own people. Egypt's fault lay not in a general tendency to raise false hopes of deliverance in people, but specifically in having falsely raised the hopes of God's people. Presumably, the Egyptian policy of encouraging rebellion against Babylon extended to all of the small nation states of the Levant. Indeed, the oracle mentions a number of nations who had, like Judah, thrown their lot in with Egypt, with what would prove to be fatal consequences. Yet God is not equally concerned with all of the peoples. It is not because Egypt had been a source of false hopes to Libya or the Arabians that she is judged, but because she had been the source of false hope to the house of Israel. God has a special concern with the fate of his own people.

God's concern for his covenant people. In the New Testament, the covenant people with whom God is concerned is no longer merely national, ethnic Israel but the spiritual "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16), a new creation in which circumcision and uncircumcision are no longer of importance (6:15). In one sense, nothing has changed. God's people remain those whom he has called, claimed as his own, and redeemed out of bondage. The Old Testament people of God had experienced his salvation in the liberation from Egypt; the New Testament people of God are those who have experienced the new exodus accomplished by Jesus, leading his people out of their bondage to sin.

But the fullness of blessing achieved in Jesus is too great to be contained within ethnic lines. His calling is to be a light also to the Gentiles (Isa. 42:6; 49:6). He came so that those who were afar off under the old covenant might be brought near in him (Eph. 2:13), made heirs of the promised Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38–39), and ingrafted into the olive tree that represents the covenant community (Rom. 11:17–24). Now the Gentiles are no longer strangers and aliens but in Christ are fellow citizens with the Jews as God's people (Eph. 2:19). Israel has not been abolished or sidelined with the coming of Christ but rather has been eschatologically expanded by the inclusion of Jews and Gentiles together into the one new people of God, the church.¹⁵

God's anger continues to be expressed against those who lead his people astray. Egypt acted as a source of temptation for Judah; therefore she, along with Judah, will experience the weight of God's wrath. Similarly, Jesus warns his disciples, "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. So watch yourselves" (Luke 17:1–3). Peter speaks of the swift destruction that awaits those who are false teachers (2 Peter 2:1). It is a fearful thing to lead astray from the true paths one of Christ's sheep, whether by our words or actions. God's action against Egypt will be swift and decisive, and will result in her removal as a source of temptation; even after her "restoration" she will never again be a stumbling block for God's people.

Factors in Egypt's downfall. But God's motivation to act against Egypt is not merely concern to punish those who led the house of Israel astray. He is also motivated by a concern for his own glory. Egypt, in the person of Pharaoh, had set herself up as a rival to the true God. Pharaoh depicted himself in semimythical terms as a godlike creature, who made and controlled the forces of blessing in nature, namely, the Nile. Such claims cannot be tolerated. God must and will act to cut the idols of Egypt down to size, just as he did earlier during the Exodus.

This time, however, it is not Israel but Egypt who will be brought up through the waters out into the desert, which will prove for them a place of judgment rather than salvation (Ezek. 29:4–5). Pharaoh's creatureliness will be demonstrated in the most incontrovertible of ways, death, followed by

the dishonorable exposure of his body to the appetites of scavenging beasts. To a culture like Egypt, where postmortem care of the body, especially the body of a pharaoh, was regarded as a matter of nothing less than cosmic significance, this was the ultimate judgment.

Egypt's downfall will also provide the rewards for God's worker in the judgment, Nebuchadnezzar (29:17–21). God will be in no one's debt; even the unrighteous laborer is worthy of his hire. How much more, then, may the righteous and faithful servant expect to see a reward! Ezekiel himself serves as an example of this. His words of hope of restoration for Israel will be fulfilled, and then he will be honored accordingly as a true prophet (29:21). God's ultimate purpose will be seen to be not merely the destruction of the unrighteous but the salvation of a people for himself, through the fulfillment of the prophetic word.

The lament over Egypt. But what does chapter 30 add to Ezekiel's argument? We have noted above that in terms of content it essentially repeats the message of chapter 29. However, the format is different, in that the message is expressed in the form of a lament. Repetition is a device used frequently in the Bible to underscore the importance of a point and to drive it home. But this is not simply repetition, it is repetition with a twist: By repeating the threat of Egypt's downfall in the form of a lament, the message gains affective strength, impacting the emotions as well as the mind.

Because of the association with death and the sense of pain and loss that that event brings, laments carry strong emotional overtones. In this case, the playing of the funeral dirge before the actual death is a token and surety that the death will ultimately occur. Egypt and all her allies will certainly fall. This message is particularly important for the exiles to hear and learn because it underlines once again the reason for Judah's demise. Instead of trusting in the Lord as her strength and Redeemer, she turned to other supports, allying herself to Egypt. She is therefore directly comparable to Egypt's allies who are mentioned here by name, for the fate of all those in covenant with Egypt is to fall by the sword (30:6).

Contemporary Significance

THE ATTRACTIVENESS OF the world. Egypt was always an attractive place, seen from an Israelite perspective. In the minds of those in the desert generation, it was the place of a varied abundance of food: of meat and fish, of cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic (Num. 11:5). Nostalgia overcame reality in painting the glories of their past existence before the Lord stepped in and saved them. Somehow the memories of the overseer's lash faded, drowned out in the aroma of spicy food. By comparison, their "saved" existence in the desert, with only manna to eat, seemed altogether bland.

The dangerous attractiveness of Egypt is a theme even as early as the patriarchal narratives. When there was nothing to eat in the Promised Land, there was food enough in Egypt (Gen. 12:10). When Lot chose the most promising land (even though it was outside the Promised Land), it bore a striking resemblance to Egypt (13:10). When the wife of promise was barren, her Egyptian maidservant turned out to be easily fertile (16:1–4). The way of obedience was always hard, while the way of Egypt always seemed easy. Similarly, when danger threatened during the period of the monarchy, Egypt was never far from Judah's thoughts as a potential savior. She, after all, had virtually unlimited resources of chariots and horses and men at her disposal, as Israel had experienced firsthand. Pharaoh Shishak, for instance, was once able to muster against Rehoboam twelve hundred chariots, sixty thousand horsemen, and men without number (2 Chron. 12:3). In comparison to the Egyptian option, what had the Lord to offer?

So too for us, the world has many powerful attractions, many idolatries that seem to offer us easy routes to security and success. There is the pursuit of political power, which says to us, "What could you not do if only you controlled the legislative process?" There is the pursuit of financial gain, which seems to offer personal comfort and the power to control your own destiny. There is the pursuit of fame and personal importance, which is perhaps a particular temptation to preachers and teachers. "What great things you could accomplish," it whispers, "if only you could preach in a larger church, where your message would be heard by more people."

Like Egypt, each of these idolatries promises us safety and success, if we will only throw in our lot with them. Like Egypt, however, if we place our trust in them, each of these will prove to be a broken reed, twisting and destroying our lives. For all their godlike claims to be able to create and

sustain a prosperous universe, the reality never matches up to the prospectus.

How not to be deceived by Satan. Like Israel before him, Jesus faced the alluring attractiveness of the ways of the world. During a forty-day spell in the desert, Jesus was tempted to trust in alternative means of reaching his goals (Matt. 4:1–11). Even the form of the temptations that he faced echoed the temptations of Israel in the desert. Jesus' hunger paralleled Israel's need for bread in the desert, which the Lord answered by providing manna (Ex. 16). Unlike the grumbling response of his ancestors, Jesus replied to Satan, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4, citing Deut. 8:3).

Next the Israelites were thirsty, and we are told that "they tested the LORD" at Massah (Ex. 17:7); Jesus responded to Satan's second temptation by saying, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (Matt. 4:7, citing Deut. 6:16).

Then the Israelites made for themselves a golden calf and bowed down to it (Ex. 32), exactly what the devil wanted Jesus to do to him. Unlike his ancestors, Jesus was not willing to comply with Satan's request. He replied, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only" (Matt. 4:10, citing Deut. 6:13). Whereas Israel failed in the desert, striking out three times, Jesus endured faithfully, resisting the attractive but fatally flawed "Egyptian option."

He did so because he was not deceived by Satan. He saw clearly that things are not always as they appear. Satan offers a solution for our felt needs, immediate relief for the blister points of life. However, our felt needs are not always our real needs. Sometimes what offers temporary relief causes long-term problems. Jesus rejected Satan's quick-fix solutions in favor of a life lived in obedience to God's call, a path that led all the way to the cross. Why did he do so? Because he saw the ultimate realities of life: that men and women would be eternally lost without a Savior, someone who lived the life of perfect obedience in their place and who died the death their sins deserved. For Jesus, there was no "Egyptian option" in accomplishing our salvation, and so he followed the hard road.

Our thinking is often much more clouded. We feel the pain of the blister points of life and are tempted to find relief in whatever form it may be offered. Yet all too often that "relief" involves a compromise with the world. When danger threatens, we run to Egypt, not to the Lord. We do so only because we have forgotten the ultimate realities of life—that sin never ultimately delivers what it promises, that those who make a compact with the world will see the source of their hopes burned up. Like most purist anglers, Satan prefers fly-fishing to bait-fishing. He would rather hook you with something that looks good but is an absolute lie than allow you even the pleasure that he promised you while he is reeling you in. But if he has to, he will place a real worm on the hook and offer you "real" relief—a relief that lasts only until the hook is firmly embedded in your jaw.

Surviving the Day of the Lord. For the destiny of this world is ultimate destruction, just like Egypt. The Day of the Lord is coming, when this present world will be burned up, a day of judgment and destruction for the ungodly (2 Peter 3:7). The true nature of all things will be revealed. The "staff of reed" in which we have placed our trust will be shown up as a false hope. The remembrance of this judgment to come should have the same salutary effect on us as Ezekiel's prophecy of Egypt's destruction was intended to have on his original audience: "Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives . . . mak[ing] every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him" (2 Peter 3:11, 14). Egypt and all who trust in her will be destroyed.

Those who trust in the Lord will endure, however. The true prophet and the faithful servant of God may have to endure mockery and disbelief in the present. In the long run, however, God is not mocked, and he will be in no one's debt. At the same time as the true nature of the fickle reed is revealed, so also will be revealed the solid refuge that Christ represents for his saints. What he began with his obedience in our place in the desert, he completed with his obedience in our place on the cross, establishing redemption for his people and raising a horn of salvation for us, just as Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, prophesied (Luke 1:68–69).

Ezekiel 30:20-32:32

IN THE ELEVENTH YEAR, in the first month on the seventh day, the word of the LORD came to me: ²¹"Son of man, I have broken the arm of Pharaoh king of Egypt. It has not been bound up for healing or put in a splint so as to become strong enough to hold a sword. ²²Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against Pharaoh king of Egypt. I will break both his arms, the good arm as well as the broken one, and make the sword fall from his hand. ²³I will disperse the Egyptians among the nations and scatter them through the countries. ²⁴I will strengthen the arms of the king of Babylon and put my sword in his hand, but I will break the arms of Pharaoh, and he will groan before him like a mortally wounded man. ²⁵I will strengthen the arms of the king of Babylon, but the arms of Pharaoh will fall limp. Then they will know that I am the LORD, when I put my sword into the hand of the king of Babylon and he brandishes it against Egypt. ²⁶I will disperse the Egyptians among the nations and scatter them through the countries. Then they will know that I am the LORD."

31:1In the eleventh year, in the third month on the first day, the word of the LORD came to me: ²"Son of man, say to Pharaoh king of Egypt and to his hordes:

"'Who can be compared with you in majesty?

Consider Assyria, once a cedar in Lebanon, with beautiful branches overshadowing the forest; it towered on high, its top above the thick foliage.

⁴The waters nourished it, deep springs made it grow tall; their streams flowed all around its base and sent their channels to all the trees of the field. ⁵So it towered higher than all the trees of the field; its boughs increased and its branches grew long, spreading because of abundant waters. ⁶All the birds of the air nested in its boughs. all the beasts of the field gave birth under its branches; all the great nations lived in its shade. ⁷It was majestic in beauty, with its spreading boughs, for its roots went down to abundant waters. ⁸The cedars in the garden of God could not rival it, nor could the pine trees equal its boughs, nor could the pine trees compare with its branches no tree in the garden of God could match its beauty. ⁹I made it beautiful with abundant branches. the envy of all the trees of Eden in the garden of God.

10" 'Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Because it towered on high, lifting its top above the thick foliage, and because it was proud of its

height, ¹¹I handed it over to the ruler of the nations, for him to deal with according to its wickedness. I cast it aside, ¹²and the most ruthless of foreign nations cut it down and left it. Its boughs fell on the mountains and in all the valleys; its branches lay broken in all the ravines of the land. All the nations of the earth came out from under its shade and left it. ¹³All the birds of the air settled on the fallen tree, and all the beasts of the field were among its branches. ¹⁴Therefore no other trees by the waters are ever to tower proudly on high, lifting their tops above the thick foliage. No other trees so well-watered are ever to reach such a height; they are all destined for death, for the earth below, among mortal men, with those who go down to the pit.

15" 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: On the day it was brought down to the grave I covered the deep springs with mourning for it; I held back its streams, and its abundant waters were restrained. Because of it I clothed Lebanon with gloom, and all the trees of the field withered away. ¹⁶I made the nations tremble at the sound of its fall when I brought it down to the grave with those who go down to the pit. Then all the trees of Eden, the choicest and best of Lebanon, all the trees that were well-watered, were consoled in the earth below. ¹⁷Those who lived in its shade, its allies among the nations, had also gone down to the grave with it, joining those killed by the sword.

¹⁸" 'Which of the trees of Eden can be compared with you in splendor and majesty? Yet you, too, will be brought down with the trees of Eden to the earth below; you will lie among the uncircumcised, with those killed by the sword.

"'This is Pharaoh and all his hordes, declares the Sovereign LORD.'"

^{32:1}In the twelfth year, in the twelfth month on the first day, the word of the LORD came to me: ²"Son of man, take up a lament concerning Pharaoh king of Egypt and say to him:

" 'You are like a lion among the nations; you are like a monster in the seas thrashing about in your streams, churning the water with your feet and muddying the streams.

³" 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

" 'With a great throng of people
I will cast my net over you,
and they will haul you up in my net.

⁴I will throw you on the land and hurl you on the open field.

I will let all the birds of the air settle on you and all the beasts of the earth gorge themselves on you.

⁵I will spread your flesh on the mountains and fill the valleys with your remains.

⁶I will drench the land with your flowing blood all the way to the mountains, and the ravines will be filled with your flesh.

⁷When I snuff you out, I will cover the heavens and darken their stars:

I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon will not give its light.

⁸All the shining lights in the heavens
I will darken over you;
I will bring darkness over your land,
declares the Sovereign LORD.

⁹I will trouble the hearts of many peoples when I bring about your destruction among the nations,

among lands you have not known.

10I will cause many peoples to be appalled at you,

and their kings will shudder with horror because of you when I brandish my sword before them. On the day of your downfall each of them will tremble every moment for his life.

11" 'For this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

" 'The sword of the king of Babylon will come against you.

¹²I will cause your hordes to fall by the swords of mighty men the most ruthless of all nations.

They will shatter the pride of Egypt, and all her hordes will be overthrown.

¹³I will destroy all her cattle from beside abundant waters no longer to be stirred by the foot of man or muddied by the hoofs of cattle.

¹⁴Then I will let her waters settle and make her streams flow like oil, declares the Sovereign LORD.

15When I make Egypt desolate and strip the land of everything in it, when I strike down all who live there, then they will know that I am the LORD.'

¹⁶"This is the lament they will chant for her. The daughters of the nations will chant it; for Egypt and all her hordes they will chant it, declares the Sovereign LORD."

¹⁷In the twelfth year, on the fifteenth day of the month, the word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁸"Son of

man, wail for the hordes of Egypt and consign to the earth below both her and the daughters of mighty nations, with those who go down to the pit. ¹⁹Say to them, 'Are you more favored than others? Go down and be laid among the uncircumcised.' ²⁰They will fall among those killed by the sword. The sword is drawn; let her be dragged off with all her hordes. ²¹From within the grave the mighty leaders will say of Egypt and her allies, 'They have come down and they lie with the uncircumcised, with those killed by the sword.'

²²"Assyria is there with her whole army; she is surrounded by the graves of all her slain, all who have fallen by the sword. ²³Their graves are in the depths of the pit and her army lies around her grave. All who had spread terror in the land of the living are slain, fallen by the sword.

²⁴"Elam is there, with all her hordes around her grave. All of them are slain, fallen by the sword. All who had spread terror in the land of the living went down uncircumcised to the earth below. They bear their shame with those who go down to the pit. ²⁵A bed is made for her among the slain, with all her hordes around her grave. All of them are uncircumcised, killed by the sword. Because their terror had spread in the land of the living, they bear their shame with those who go down to the pit; they are laid among the slain.

²⁶"Meshech and Tubal are there, with all their hordes around their graves. All of them are uncircumcised, killed by the sword because they spread their terror in the land of the living. ²⁷Do they not lie with the other uncircumcised warriors who have fallen, who went down to the grave with their weapons of war, whose swords were placed under their heads? The punishment for their sins

rested on their bones, though the terror of these warriors had stalked through the land of the living.

²⁸"You too, O Pharaoh, will be broken and will lie among the uncircumcised, with those killed by the sword.

²⁹"Edom is there, her kings and all her princes; despite their power, they are laid with those killed by the sword. They lie with the uncircumcised, with those who go down to the pit.

30"All the princes of the north and all the Sidonians are there; they went down with the slain in disgrace despite the terror caused by their power. They lie uncircumcised with those killed by the sword and bear their shame with those who go down to the pit.

³¹"Pharaoh—he and all his army—will see them and he will be consoled for all his hordes that were killed by the sword, declares the Sovereign LORD. ³²Although I had him spread terror in the land of the living, Pharaoh and all his hordes will be laid among the uncircumcised, with those killed by the sword, declares the Sovereign LORD."

Original Meaning

In the previous unit we examined the first three of the seven oracles that Ezekiel utters against Egypt. This present unit looks at the last four oracles. This section brings to a close the prophet's round of oracles against the nations.

The Fourth Oracle (30:20–26)

THE FOURTH OF the seven oracles against Egypt declares that God has already begun to act. The date formula in 30:20 places it shortly before the fall of Jerusalem; the oracle itself rules out the possibility of any relief coming from the Egyptian direction, since the Lord has "broken the arm of Pharaoh king of Egypt" (30:21). The historical background of this oracle

lies in an apparent attempt by Pharaoh Hophra to intervene in the crisis of his day (Jer. 37:5); however, though this led to a withdrawal of Nebuchadnezzar's army in the short term, the hopes raised in the Judean capital were soon to be dashed. After dealing with the Egyptians, Nebuchadnezzar returned to finish what he had started in Jerusalem (Jer. 39:1).

The defeat of Egypt is described in terms of a breaking of Pharaoh's arm (Ezek. 30:21). The "arm" in the Old Testament is the part of the body through which a person acts. It is therefore a symbol of strength: A strong arm enables effective action, while a broken arm renders a person helpless (cf. Job 22:9; Ps. 10:15). The fundamental contrast in this oracle is between the broken arms of Pharaoh and the arms of Nebuchadnezzar that have been strengthened by the Lord (Ezek. 30:25). This bout is clearly not an equal contest. Ezekiel even anticipates potential objections that though Pharaoh's arm has been broken, it may be healed (30:21), or that though one arm has been broken Pharaoh still has another arm with which to fight (30:22). Even the faintest source of hope must be removed; the broken arm will not receive the medical treatment necessary for it to be healed. On the contrary, it will be broken again, along with the sound arm that remains (30:22). Egypt's power will be comprehensively destroyed, a prediction ultimately fulfilled in the conquest of Egypt by Cambyses in 525 B.C.

In the background of this struggle between two world powers, however, there is another actor. The "arm" that acts most frequently in the Old Testament is the arm of the Lord, notably in the Exodus, when he brought his people out of Egypt "by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" (Deut. 4:34). This formula is a constant refrain throughout the Old Testament; in this passage the arm of the Lord is not directly referred to, but the Lord's action is everywhere evident. He is the one who will break Pharaoh's arms and strengthen Nebuchadnezzar's (Ezek. 30:22, 25). It is the Lord's sword that Nebuchadnezzar will draw against Egypt (30:25). It is the Lord who will scatter the Egyptians among the nations (30:26). The clash of the superpowers is under his control.

The Fifth Oracle (31:1–18)

THE FIFTH ORACLE against Egypt compares Pharaoh to a massive tree that is felled because of its pride. Who is comparable to Pharaoh in greatness? He

himself recognized no equal, and in what follows Ezekiel takes his claims of greatness seriously. He is like a cypress (31:3)³ or a mighty cedar in Lebanon; there follows a graphic picture of a tree of supernatural proportions. The myth of a tree that constitutes the heart of ordered existence, with its roots in the subterranean depths and its topmost branches in the sublime heights, providing shelter for the entire animal world, was part of the lore of the surrounding nations.⁴

Here Ezekiel puts this mythical picture to use as a description of Egypt's greatness, like a mighty cedar in Lebanon, with its topmost branches in the clouds (Ezek. 31:3). Her roots were fed by the deep springs under the earth (thôm, 31:4). As a result, she grew higher than all the other trees of the earth, providing shelter for all the birds of the air and the beasts of the field (31:5–6; cf. Dan. 4:10–12). In plain language, she became the greatest of nations, the overlord of all the nations. In fact, her greatness surpassed earthly proportions; not even the trees of the jewel of original creation, Eden itself, could match Egypt's beauty. Here are echoes of the same exalted status attributed to the king of Tyre (Ezek. 28:13–14), and also of the same fundamental sin: pride (28:17; 31:10).

Pride once again precedes a fall from grace. In all the vivid word pictures used by Ezekiel in the oracles against the foreign nations, the nature of the glorious object described contains within it the seeds of its own destruction. Tyre was a majestic ship, but is now sunk (ch. 27). Her king was as glorious as the first man, a semidivine being in the Garden of Eden, but like Adam he was driven out (28:1–19). Pharaoh is a crocodile of mythical proportions, but will be hunted down like an ordinary reptile (29:1–16). Here now, Egypt is a great world tree, but it will be felled by the cosmic lumberjack.

It was the Lord who had raised Egypt to her elevated status ("I made it beautiful with abundant branches," Ezek. 31:9), but she considered her attainments something of which to be proud (31:10). The Lord can just as easily cast her down, as the personal pronouns indicate: "I handed it over . . . I cast it aside" (31:11). The agency of execution is human ("the ruler of the nations," 31:11), but the instructions come from on high. Broken and shattered, the tree no longer provides shade and protection for the birds and the beasts, as a king might for his people (Lam. 4:20); instead, its fallen branches are merely a convenient resting place for them (Ezek.

31:13). Just as her height was unparalleled in her time, so it will never again be surpassed; for all the dominant nations that come after her will share her mortality, treading along with her the way to destruction, bound for the underworld (Ezek. 31:14).

The cosmic scale of the tree is matched by cosmic mourning at its fall and descent into Sheol, the home of the unworthy dead.⁷ The cosmic springs are shut up, while Lebanon, the home of the mighty cedar, is darkened (31:15). The heights and the depths, the sources of light and subterranean water, are thus both clothed in mourning, a state also affecting those in between.

The nations of the world trembled at the sound of the tree's fall, whose echoes reverberated even into the underworld. Those of its predecessors who had envied it, described as "the trees of Eden, the choicest and best of Lebanon" (31:16), were gratified in its sharing of their demise, while those who had allied themselves to it went down with it to Sheol (31:17). There they joined those killed by the sword, whose unpeaceful end was thought in some way to carry over to their state beyond death. Ezekiel brings out the point of the word picture explicitly in 31:18. Though Egypt's splendor and majesty were unrivaled in all the powerful nations who went before (i.e., the "trees of Eden"), she too will share their fate in the underworld among those outside the peaceful community, among the uncircumcised and those slain by the sword.

The Sixth Oracle (32:1–16)

IN HIS SIXTH oracle against Egypt, Ezekiel returns to the image of Pharaoh as crocodile. This time the image is combined with that of a lion, with the emphasis more on the natural aspect of the imagery than the supernatural overtones of chapter 29. The lion and crocodile are two mighty beasts, who appear all-powerful (32:2). Indeed, both images were regularly appropriated by the pharaohs as positive self-descriptions.

Yet in spite of their strength, both may be hunted and killed. Though Pharaoh considers himself like a lion, the great Hunter has him in his sights. Once more through human agency ("with a great throng of people," 32:3), the Lord will cast his net over Pharaoh, a method of hunting suitable to either crocodiles or lions (cf. 19:8). His corpse will be thrown to the ground to provide a home and food for the birds of the air and beasts of the

field, much as was the fallen cosmic tree in 31:13. At this point, the scale of Pharaoh's demise takes on semimythical proportions: His body is big enough to be spread on the mountains and fill the valleys, his blood enough to water the land and fill the ravines (32:5–6).

The images of cosmic darkness and universal mourning are invoked, both of which were present in the previous oracle (31:15–16). In an echo of the penultimate Exodus plague on Egypt, the plague of darkness (Ex. 10:21–22), the heavens will be darkened, and sun, moon, and stars will fail to give light (Ezek. 32:7). The peoples will be appalled, and their kings will shudder because of the scale of Egypt's devastation, fearing for their own lives (32:9–10).

In this final onslaught against Egypt, the king of Babylon will shatter her pride (32:11–12). The night of the first Passover was a mere firstfruits in comparison to this full harvest of God's judgment, for on that occasion only the firstborn of human beings and animals died (Ex. 12:29). Here, however, all people and animals are cut off from the land (Ezek. 32:13). The demise of the great animal-human of verse 2 is underlined by the ceasing of his thrashing around, muddying the streams (32:13). Now the waters of Egypt will flow as clear and smooth as oil, untroubled by any disturbance (32:14). Egypt will once again recognize the sovereign power of the Lord when he acts to strike down all who live there, this time with no exceptions (32:15). The lament is prepared; all that waits is the execution of the divine decree (32:16).

The Seventh Oracle (32:17–32)

THE FINAL ORACLE against Egypt, and the final oracle in the sequence of oracles against the nations, sums up everything that has gone before by means of a comprehensive tour of the underworld, which is to be Egypt's new home. Six nations are named as already there: Assyria, Elam, Meshech-Tubal, Edom, the princes of the north, and Sidon. Egypt is the climactic and completing seventh nation of the underworld.

Once again, the oracle draws out and expands an idea present in an earlier pronouncement (31:17–18), which spoke of Egypt's descent into the underworld and the company she would keep there. Here, however, the picture is presented in graphic detail. Egypt's future home will be among the unquiet dead—with those outside the covenant ("the uncircumcised")⁹

and those who fell by the sword (32:21). Though all these other nations were once mighty and had administered a reign of terror while they lived, now they bear the reproach for their iniquity. A place of punishment—"the pit" (32:24)—is prepared for all such, and Pharaoh certainly qualifies to join the club (32:28). For the time of the Lord's appointing, he too spread terror in the land of the living (32:32), but soon he will become merely a part of the terror that is the land of the dead. The Sovereign Lord has spoken (32:32).

Bridging Contexts

THE FANTASY OF EGYPT. As with the preceding oracles against Egypt, so also these oracles only make sense against the background of what Egypt represented to Israel. Egypt frequently figured in Judean fantasies as a substitute for the Lord, providing chariots and horses to prop up Judean efforts to secure independence from the great world powers of the East. These fantasies must be shattered before the people can be restored; they need to see that only the Lord is able to deliver them from all dangers.

Ezekiel shatters the Judean illusions about Egypt by opening the people's eyes to Egypt's coming fate. Even though her present powers were indeed of mythical proportions—hence the use of mythical images of the great sea monster or world tree—her end will be the eminently unmythical fate of death. In fact, the situation is even worse than that, for her present power is much diminished. The Lord has already broken one of Pharaoh's arms and before long will break the remaining arm, as well as rebreak the broken limb, thus leaving Egypt helpless and unable to offer help to others. In the conflict between the Lord and the world powers, the Lord is always victorious. Moreover, in that struggle the Lord employs human agents to do his bidding, and Nebuchadnezzar is nothing less than the servant of the Lord, equipped with the sword of the Lord to execute judgment on the Lord's enemies (30:24). To stand against Nebuchadnezzar is to stand against the Lord and to incur certain death, as Egypt's allies will find out.

Ezekiel's description of the underworld draws on what would then have been a widely accepted three-layer view of the universe. The upper layer (heaven) was the home of the divine beings; the center layer was the "land of the living," while underneath lay Sheol, the realm of death and the dead. The Old Testament descriptions of this place are relatively sparse compared to the fullness of New Testament revelation. It is more accurate to characterize it as a place of "underlife" than a place of "afterlife," for there is nothing in that realm that deserves the epithet of "life." It is a place of shadows, of the experiencing by the unrighteous of the unsuffered consequences of a lifetime. If Egypt and her pharaoh rightly belong there, so also do all who trust in her. The unexpressed implication is that it will not be so for those who trust in the Lord.

The deceit of contemporary Egypts. In our context, Egypt does not hold the same attractions as it did for Ezekiel's hearers. For us, it is merely a geographical region, not a spiritual entity. However, the same basic temptations assail us, for we too have our earthly strongholds in which we place our trust, blindly worshiping and serving created things rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:25). The end of Egypt as a factor in our spirituality is not the end of the lie of self-sufficiency; rather, the lie has endless power to change into a new form and reshape for maximum appeal in each of our lives. For example, for some contemporary people the allure of Egypt is replaced by the allure of wealth. For those people, money seems to offer the same things that Egypt offered Judah: independence, freedom from outside controls and limits, the power to choose, and comfortable affluence. The core lie is the same; only the packaging has changed.

Yet the new idol is just as deceitful as the old—and for the same reasons. On the one hand, its power is not as great as we are tempted to believe. The mythical aura of invincibility that wealth carries in our society is just that: a myth. God can bankrupt the richest person, or in allowing them to possess wealth he can still deny them the blessings they thought it would give them: freedom, happiness, and independence. Many people who achieve great wealth nonetheless find their lives filled with a pervasive boredom. God continues to shatter the arms of the strongest idols of this world.

Yet even if the power of money were as great as its advertising copy claims, so that it really could buy happiness and satisfaction in life, death still remains as the great leveler and relativizer of all of this world's goods. As the grim Spanish proverb puts it: "There are no pockets in the shroud." On the day of death, the inability of wealth to deliver lasting blessings will become thoroughly evident, as deceased millionaires rub shoulders in the

grave with paupers. There are no exclusive country club areas in either heaven or hell.

Wealth is, of course, not the only contemporary "Egypt substitute." There are perhaps as many claimants to the title as there are people. On all sides, we are presented with products and ideologies, philosophies and relationships, each of which asserts that it alone offers true freedom. Some are more self-evidently illusory in the present than others: the alcoholic's bottle and the crack addict's needle are more obviously deceptive in what they offer than the respectable middle-class idols of career, reputation, family, and possessions.

Yet ultimately any refuge apart from God is a delusion, professing a power that it does not have, promising much and delivering little. The most profound work of God in our lives is the Spirit's work of unmasking our own personal idolatries, the refuges in which we have come to trust rather than him. Often he does so by bringing us through repeated trials in a particular area of our lives that expose the true nature and impotence of our idols. Though the process may be painful, it is nonetheless an act of God's grace when he exposes the destitution of our idols in this life, lest we share their fate in death.

Contemporary Significance

In What do we trust? The declaration on U.S. bank notes is unequivocal: "In God we trust." Unfortunately, it is a single-mindedness that few of us, even as Christians, live out in practice. The temptation to trust in the paper on which the slogan is written rather than in the God of whom the slogan speaks is real. Yet on what does our faith in that piece of paper rest? The paper can be burned up, lost, or stolen. Even if the paper is retained, its value can be devastated through runaway inflation to the point where the note itself is virtually worthless. Moreover, even if none of these things happen, U.S. dollars are not the local currency beyond the grave. How foolish we are, then, to place our trust in money! Yet how many of us still believe unflinchingly in its power to bless us, and that possessing more of it will make our life more meaningful and desirable! The number of people who participate weekly in the various state and local lotteries demonstrates the power of that myth in our society.

Or consider the power of the myth of career. How many people have devoted their lives to finding a fulfilling and rewarding job? In the process, they may sacrifice precious relationships and outside interests on the altar of success, which they have defined as career progress. How many find, if they finally reach the top of the ladder, that they wish they had climbed a different one? Even if they are content with the ladder they have climbed and they receive the benediction of their idol, do its blessings last? Sooner or later, through retirement or death, the ladder is put away. The job is turned over to someone else. Where will they be then?

But perhaps these are altogether too obvious idols to deceive us. Perhaps we have instead sacrificed everything on the altar of family. What could be more noble than laying down our lives for the sake of our loved ones? Yet if our trust is in our family to provide meaning and value in our lives, then we too are headed for disappointment sooner or later. In the short term, we should remember that we are investing our love in fallen sinners. Even faithful Christians see their spouses commit adultery or their children rebel and run away, in spite of their best efforts. The pain and sorrow of such traumas are real and intense. But in the life of someone for whom family has become the controlling myth, they are more than intense; they are devastating. Life loses all its meaning, for meaning was determined by the sense of family.

Yet, tragic though it is, such a painful loss may be God's way of demonstrating the powerlessness of "family" to save. It is a broken reed, which wounds those who lean on it. Even those who do not experience that kind of disillusionment through broken family relationships must still face up to the reality of death. The ultimate dissolution of all earthly relationships is a fact that cannot be gainsaid. Relationships by blood or marriage may serve to gain us citizenship in earthly kingdoms, but they will avail us nothing when it comes to citizenship in the kingdom of heaven.

Escape from ultimate disappointment. In his book *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis imagines a group of people on a day trip from hell to the borders of heaven. Hell is depicted as a gray, shadowy place, full of ordinary things like bus stops and fish-and-chip shops, but ultimately unreal. Heaven, on the other hand, is bright, sharp, and real. It is an uncomfortable place for the shadowy, unsubstantial people on the day trip. On their arrival, they are each faced with the choice of whether to stay in

heaven and so gradually, painfully become "real," or to return to the comfortable shadowland. In each case, the decision boils down to a choice between retaining an idol and gradually becoming nothing more than a pale reflection of the idol itself, or allowing the idol to be killed, thus being set free to a new dimension of life. Lewis's allegory describes well the choice that we are faced within life: Follow the true God along the real path—often a painful decision but ultimately the way to life—or believe our idols when they tell us that we cannot live without them and settle for an empty promise now and ultimate disappointment.

I wonder how many of the painful experiences we encounter in life are God's direct challenges to the "Egypts" in our lives? Though they are painful, yet these "frowning providences" (as the Puritans called them) are still evidence of God's goodness and love for us. Thanks be to God that he often acts sooner rather than later to expose the powerlessness of that in which we have trusted to save ourselves. But how slow we often are to learn!

Ezekiel 33

THE WORD OF THE LORD came to me: ²"Son of man. speak to your countrymen and say to them: 'When I bring the sword against a land, and the people of the land choose one of their men and make him their watchman, ³ and he sees the sword coming against the land and blows the trumpet to warn the people, ⁴then if anyone hears the trumpet but does not take warning and the sword comes and takes his life, his blood will be on his own head. ⁵Since he heard the sound of the trumpet but did not take warning, his blood will be on his own head. If he had taken warning, he would have saved himself. ⁶But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people and the sword comes and takes the life of one of them, that man will be taken away because of his sin, but I will hold the watchman accountable for his blood.'

⁷"Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. ⁸When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. ⁹But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself.

¹⁰"Son of man, say to the house of Israel, 'This is what you are saying: "Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?" ', ¹¹Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that

they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?'

12"Therefore, son of man, say to your countrymen, 'The righteousness of the righteous man will not save him when he disobeys, and the wickedness of the wicked man will not cause him to fall when he turns from it. The righteous man, if he sins, will not be allowed to live because of his former righteousness.' ¹³If I tell the righteous man that he will surely live, but then he trusts in his righteousness and does evil, none of the righteous things he has done will be remembered; he will die for the evil he has done. ¹⁴And if I say to the wicked man, 'You will surely die,' but he then turns away from his sin and does what is just and right—¹⁵if he gives back what he took in pledge for a loan, returns what he has stolen, follows the decrees that give life, and does no evil, he will surely live; he will not die. ¹⁶None of the sins he has committed will be remembered against him. He has done what is just and right; he will surely live.

¹⁷"Yet your countrymen say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' But it is their way that is not just. ¹⁸If a righteous man turns from his righteousness and does evil, he will die for it. ¹⁹And if a wicked man turns away from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he will live by doing so. ²⁰Yet, O house of Israel, you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' But I will judge each of you according to his own ways."

²¹In the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month on the fifth day, a man who had escaped from Jerusalem came to me and said, "The city has fallen!" ²²Now the evening before the man arrived, the hand of the LORD was upon me, and he opened my mouth before the man came to me in the

morning. So my mouth was opened and I was no longer silent.

²³Then the word of the LORD came to me: ²⁴"Son of man, the people living in those ruins in the land of Israel are saying, 'Abraham was only one man, yet he possessed the land. But we are many; surely the land has been given to us as our possession.' ²⁵Therefore say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Since you eat meat with the blood still in it and look to your idols and shed blood, should you then possess the land? ²⁶You rely on your sword, you do detestable things, and each of you defiles his neighbor's wife. Should you then possess the land?'

27"Say this to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: As surely as I live, those who are left in the ruins will fall by the sword, those out in the country I will give to the wild animals to be devoured, and those in strongholds and caves will die of a plague. ²⁸I will make the land a desolate waste, and her proud strength will come to an end, and the mountains of Israel will become desolate so that no one will cross them. ²⁹Then they will know that I am the LORD, when I have made the land a desolate waste because of all the detestable things they have done.'

³⁰"As for you, son of man, your countrymen are talking together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, saying to each other, 'Come and hear the message that has come from the LORD.' ³¹My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. ³²Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice

and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice.

33"When all this comes true—and it surely will—then they will know that a prophet has been among them."

Original Meaning

AFTER THE JUDGMENT oracles of Ezekiel 1–24 and the oracles against the foreign nations in chapters 25–32, we finally get to the good news in chapters 34–48. The turning point in the saga is chapter 33, and it comes with the arrival among the exiles of the news of Jerusalem's fall. That bad news clears the ground for the proclamation of something new. Ezekiel 33 is a carefully constructed whole, with a chiastic movement that hinges around the confirmation of the fall of Jerusalem (33:21–22). Verses 1–11 find a counterpart in verses 30–33, with their emphasis on hearing or not hearing the prophetic word, while verses 12–20 share similar emphases on moral behavior with verses 23–29. The whole chapter should thus be seen as a response to the news of that central event of Jerusalem's fall.

In that respect, this chapter continues logically on from the end of chapter 24, where Ezekiel was told to expect a survivor ($p\bar{a}lit$)² to come bringing news of Jerusalem's demise (24:26). In chapter 33, the survivor arrives. Similarly, the removal of the prophet's dumbness, anticipated in 24:27, becomes a reality in 33:22. These references bracket off the oracles against the foreign nations (chs. 25–32) as a separate section that completes the judgment oracles of the prophet. In chapters 34–48 the prophet's focus is placed on oracles proclaiming the salvation and restoration of Israel. These distinctions are not absolute, of course; there is hope of salvation in chapters 1–32 and words of judgment in chapters 34–48. But the whole tenor of the prophet's ministry undergoes a dramatic paradigm shift, now that Jerusalem has fallen.

Ezekiel 33 opens with the depiction of the prophet as "watchman," just as did his oracles of destruction in chapter 3. On one level, this functions as a means of renewing the prophet's commission for his new ministry.³ However, the similarities between the two sections should not be overpressed. In chapter 3, the image functioned as part of a private message

to the prophet, pressing on him the importance of taking his task seriously. In chapter 33, it is part of a public proclamation (33:2, 7), pressing in on the people their own responsibility for their fate and the real possibility, even now, of repentance and return.

The proclamation starts from the general statement of a commonly accepted fact, that when the Lord sent a judgment against a land, the watchman was responsible for the consequences only if he did not warn the people (33:2–6). From this general principle, Ezekiel moves to the specific case facing the people in verses 7–9: Clearly the Lord has sent judgment against his people, and Ezekiel was appointed as his watchman (33:7). No one who has read chapters 4–32 can doubt the prophet's faithfulness to proclaiming the judgment to come; he is free from any culpability in the death of the wicked.

But does this mean that there is now no hope for God's rebellious people? Having failed to heed the prophetic word of warning, does that mean that since judgment has come, they are as good as dead? This seems to have been the thought among at least some of the exiles. They are saying to one another: "Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?" (33:10). Now that Jerusalem is on the brink of destruction and they are finally taking the possibility of judgment seriously, despair is a real danger.

Ezekiel's answer to that was that the living God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but rather seeks their repentance that they may live (33:11; cf. 18:31–32). God's judgment is not a fixed, deterministic fate that operates regardless of human action, but rather is a response to actual human behavior. Even now, it is not too late to turn and be saved. The fundamental covenant choice of life or death is still open to the people (33:11). The prophet illustrates the reality of that choice by appealing to two case studies, familiar from chapter 18. In the first case, a righteous man "trusts in his [past] righteousness" and does evil; he will surely die and not live (33:13). In the second, a wicked man turns from his sins and does what is right; he will surely live and not die (33:14).

Although these are presented as two equal and opposite cases, it is evident from the context that the primary interest is the second case—the wicked person who may yet live. That is the situation in which the people find themselves in 33:10. The prophet's point is that neither judgment nor

salvation is an automatic process, but each works itself out through a life of "righteousness" or "wickedness"—that is, a life lived in accordance with the terms of the covenant ("the decrees that give life," 33:15) or in violation of it.

The problem that the people face is not that of God's justice, of which they complain in 33:17. His ways are indeed just, even more than just, since the path to life is continuously held open to rebels. The problem is with the people's lack of righteousness; they have followed an unjust way (33:17). They have consistently chosen the path to death over the path to life. That is what makes it bad news that God will judge each according to his own way (33:20)! Nonetheless, the point of the case studies is that there is a remedy for the bad news. The possibility of repentance is Ezekiel's answer to despair, though the need for perseverance is also there to counteract any tendency toward presumption.

This is the context in which Ezekiel places the news of Jerusalem's destruction (33:21–22). A survivor brings an eyewitness testimony of the city's fall. This is the radical turning point in the fortunes of God's people and in Ezekiel's own life. His dumbness, which has been with him since his commissioning as a prophet in 3:26–27, is now removed, just as the Lord promised in chapter 24. The prophet has finally been released from his divinely imposed bondage. The possibility of a new beginning for God's people similarly exists. But which will they choose: life or death?

The prophet is not left long in suspense. The following two sections make it clear that the hearts of God's people have not been fundamentally changed even by this radical act of judgment. Both back home in Judah (33:23–29) and among the exiles (33:30–33), it is business as usual. Those who remain behind in Judah, inhabiting the ruins of God's judgment, see the situation as an opportunity for economic gain rather than personal and societal repentance. Claiming to be Abraham's children, they interpret God's covenant promise of the land to Abraham as an inalienable right, an unconditional covenant. If Abraham as one man was able to possess the land, how much more his many descendants still living in the land (33:24)?

Indeed, the example of Abraham was a pertinent one to those who experienced the devastation of the Promised Land. The prophet Isaiah had urged the people to

Look to Abraham, your father,
and to Sarah, who gave you birth.
When I called him he was but one,
and I blessed him and made him many.
The LORD will surely comfort Zion
and will look with compassion on all her ruins;
he will make her deserts like Eden,
her wastelands like the garden of the LORD. (Isa. 51:2–
3)

The promise to Abraham should indeed act as an assurance that God would not completely abandon Israel but would comfort Zion and look with compassion on all her ruins (cf. Mic. 7:18–19). But this assurance of God's covenant faithfulness is only relevant for those who are, like Abraham, covenant-keepers. Those who do not continue in Abraham's faithful ways cannot expect to experience the blessings of the covenant.

The people are, in fact, corporately in a situation analogous to the first case study described by Ezekiel. They are relying on earlier righteousness—in this case, that of Abraham—to see them through in the face of present disobedience. The prophet describes their disobedience in the stereotypical terms of "eat[ing] meat with the blood still in it and look[ing] to . . . idols and shed[ding] blood" (Ezek. 33:25), or "you rely on your sword, you do detestable things, and each of you defiles his neighbor's wife" (33:26). Should such covenant-breakers inherit the blessings of the covenant and possess the land? By no means! Rather, these covenant-breakers will continue to inherit the three classic curses of the covenant: the sword, wild animals, and plague (33:27; cf. Lev. 26:22, 25). The land will continue to suffer God's judgment until it becomes a desolate wasteland (Ezek. 33:28–29; cf. Lev. 26:32–33). All their hopes will come to nothing.

Nor are matters any better among the exiles. The news of Jerusalem's fall appears to have given Ezekiel's message a certain popularity and topicality. He is now the subject of conversation in the cities and doorways (Ezek. 33:30). To use a contemporary analogy, he is the toast of the talk shows. But the interest is superficial: The people listen to his words but do not put them into practice, regarding them as an intriguing phenomenon rather than a life-changing reality. His fame is like that of a pop star, whose

declarations on spiritual matters may arouse curiosity but are scarcely accorded authoritative status. People may have been humming along to his tune, but they are paying no attention to the true meaning of his lyrics.

Time, however, will prove the power of the word of the Lord through Ezekiel: "When all this comes true—and it surely will—then they will know that a prophet has been among them" (33:33). In that day, just as all will know experientially the power of the Lord, so they will also be forced to recognize the authenticity of the Lord's prophet.

Bridging Contexts

THE HARSH REALITIES of life. The people of Ezekiel's day were a people whose physical and psychological world had collapsed. The news of the destruction of Jerusalem was a paradigm-shaking reality. It was as if the sky had fallen on their heads. The central belief structures of their world crumbled, causing many of them to be faced with the temptations of overwhelming doubt and despair. These are not issues that are often addressed from the pulpits of our churches, where a relentlessly upbeat image of the Christian life is presented as the norm. "Smile, Jesus loves you!" is our slogan. Yet for many people, the outward smile conceals teeth gritted to endure the harsh realities of life. The temptations to doubt and despair are still there under the surface, but in our contemporary circles they are "the temptation that dare not speak its name."

The reality that life is not uniformly wonderful has, of course, always been true. However, the willingness to face up to that fact is something that varies from culture to culture and generation to generation, depending on that generation's experience. Thus the generation that grew up in Europe around the turn of the century possessed a strong corporate faith in the progress and perfectibility of humankind—only to have that faith decisively shattered in the trenches of the Somme and the mud of Passchendaele. The post-First World War generation knew firsthand what doubt and despair were. They knew how hard faith in the reality and love of God was in a brutal and bloody world.

On a smaller scale, a similar shift in the cultural landscape is taking place in our time. The Baby Boomers (those born between the end of the Second World War and 1960) have grown up in an age of unprecedented economic growth and social improvement. As a generation, they came to expect endless opportunities and affluence; in general, they believe that through hard work and education, anything is possible. Theirs is an essentially optimistic outlook on life, which is mirrored by the upbeat, "self-help" approach of many sermons.

The generation that followed them, however, commonly dubbed the "Baby Busters" or "Generation X," has grown up in a world of recession and divorce, of global warming and downsizing.⁶ As a result, in spite of their relative affluence, they are not an optimistic generation, but rather cynical and bored, bereft of meaning and purpose.⁷ Such a generation is not likely to be reached by pop psychology and pat answers, for they know all too well the meaning of doubt and despair. Douglas Coupland expresses his own experience of doubt and despair in these terms:

Is feeling nothing the inevitable result of believing in nothing? And then I got to feeling frightened—thinking that there might not actually be anything to believe in, in particular. I thought it would be such a sick joke to have to remain alive for decades and not believe in or feel anything.8

Not everyone of his generation shares these same feelings, of course. Personal experiences significantly shape each person in different ways. However, the church must recognize the general shift in cultural outlook to address the unchanging gospel in ways that still communicate. Part of that shift in our day will be learning to preach to the despairing in ways that speak to their particular needs and temptations.

A deep awareness of sin. The despair felt among the exiles was not simply the result of the hand fate had dealt them, however. It was the result of the evidence of God's judgment on his people. They despaired not simply because of their situation but because of their sin (33:10). Such a depth of awareness of sin is not common in our day. Few today ever reach the point of crying out in recognition of God's holiness, "How then can we live?" (33:10). Few come to the deep conviction that there is a God and there is judgment for sin and there may even be salvation, but that *it may not be for them!*

Such, however, was the experience of some past ages. For example, in the classic eighteenth-century work *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State*, Thomas Boston described the eleventh (!) stage in the conversion process in the following terms:

The man being thus far humbled . . . looks on himself as unworthy of Christ, and unworthy of the favour of God. . . . If you now tell him he is welcome to Christ, if he will come to him, he is apt to say, "Can such a vile and unworthy wretch as I be welcome to the holy Jesus?"

Here, doubtless drawing on his own extensive pastoral experience in a rural congregation in Scotland, Boston depicts a man who has been so crushed by the preaching of the law that he feels a sense of total despair. He feels his sin to be so great that even Jesus will not welcome him. Of course, at the root of such despair is pride rather than true humility, as Boston goes on to show. It is precisely such vile wretches that the Son of Man came to seek and save (Matt. 9:12–13). However, it is a mark of the prominent preaching by Boston and his contemporaries of the claims of the law of God on all people and the certainty of God's wrath against unbelievers that such feelings of despair were produced.

Boston was far from being a legalist, but he was not afraid to say from his pulpit, "O wicked man, you will surely die" (Ezek. 33:8). Sometimes the pendulum may indeed have swung too far in that direction, so that genuine believers lacked assurance of salvation, but that is scarcely a danger in most contemporary pulpits. We need to learn from the past how to preach for deep heart conviction of sin, until people cry out in our churches also, "What must I do to be saved?"

Are we getting through? Of course, not everyone will respond in such positive terms to the plain preaching of the law. There will be those who, like the remnant left in Judah, feel that all this preaching has nothing to do with them. Instead of appealing to Abraham, as Ezekiel's contemporaries did (Ezek. 33:24), in our churches they may appeal to the fact that they have grown up in the church, as have their parents before them. Such an appeal to tradition is not enough. Even though God promises to deal

faithfully with the children of his people (Gen. 17:8; Acts 2:39), that promise does not work *apart from* their faith but *through* their faith. It is as the next generation is brought by the Holy Spirit to their own expression of faith in the God of their fathers that they inherit the promises of their fathers' God.

Others may respond in a superficially favorable way, praising the clarity with which the Word is being preached. They listen and listen, but never learn or do. For them, as for some of Ezekiel's hearers, the preacher is merely an entertainer, not a conveyer of life-changing truth. Like the seed that fell on rocky ground in the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:5–6), there is no substance to their claim to faith. Time will demonstrate that fact, as they wilt under the pressures of life.

Contemporary Significance

SUPERFICIAL OR GENUINE? What do we say to those whose world has caved in? What specific temptations and problems do such people face? Those living through the aftermath of personal or societal disaster face the danger of false hope of shallow and easy answers. Many people seem to think that suffering inevitably prepares one for sainthood. Suffering is not automatically redemptive, however, nor are all the promises of God's Word available equally to all without distinction. The blessings of a covenant relationship with God come only to those within the covenant community who are living a life of obedience to the covenant.

This means that there is no automatic salvation to be found in having prayed a particular prayer, or in having been received into the membership of a particular church, or in having been baptized (whether as a child or an adult). The promises made to Abraham are real and substantial, but they are only effective for those who are genuinely Abraham's spiritual children. Such people are justified by faith, just as he was, but specifically they are justified by a faith that works itself out in action, just as his did (James 2:20–24). A claim of faith without the works that go along with it is a false claim, and the hope that is based on it is a false hope. True saints are those who persevere in faith and action to the end. In an age of "easy-believism," this is a note that needs to be sounded more clearly in our churches. The law needs to be clearly preached to those who consider themselves

comfortably within the covenant community, even though their lives demonstrate no evidence to back up their claim, to press in on them their need of Christ.

For some, a major life crisis may cause them to attend church, but only as superficial hearers. Like Ezekiel's audience, they may find the form of the message interesting and stimulating, but they never feel its power in their hearts as a life-changing reality. Those of us who are preachers need to be careful that we do not foster such shallow attention. In our day, there is a focus on "seeker-sensitive" services that will present the gospel in a way that will be attractive to such people. The task of the church, however, is not to assemble seekers but to make disciples.

The task of the preacher. We should certainly have services that are open and understandable to all who come, but we should never forget that our goal is to see these people move beyond being seekers to being those who are found in Christ. The seriousness of the message must never be obscured by the desire to make the medium more attractive. The preacher's task is not to entertain or inform but to plead passionately with men and women to flee the wrath that is to come on account of sin. The preacher is commissioned to call clearly for repentance and turning to Christ, to be a watchman rather than an entertainer.

But preachers must not only preach the law to confront the hypocrite, they must also preach the gospel to woo the lost sheep. They must answer the pressing question of the justice of God (Ezek. 33:17). In times of personal or societal meltdown, the question for many is, "Why are these things happening to me? What did I ever do to deserve it?" In Judah's case, the answer to that question was apparently simple: It is not the Lord's way that is unjust, but rather their own ways are unjust (33:20). The disaster that had befallen Jerusalem was the consequence of Jerusalem's sin, as Ezekiel had gone to considerable lengths to demonstrate before the city fell. But God's purpose even in this painful judgment was not death for the errant sheep but life; after all, the Lord has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He does not commission his prophet to say: "Turn or burn; take it or leave it; the choice is entirely yours." Instead, he instructs his watchman to cry out: "Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?" (33:11).

Responding to life's struggles. Sometimes, as with Jerusalem, the catastrophic things that happen to you are the results of your own sin. In other cases, they are not directly the result of your own sin. In either event, however, your responsibility is the same: to heed the call to respond to the glory of God. Painful experiences may be the occasion for our eyes being opened to God for the first time, or they may be the call to demonstrate perseverance in the midst of the depths of our suffering. As Christians they are never, however, simply designed to crush us. In our deepest and most desperate struggles, the problem lies not in God's unfairness in placing these burdens on us, but rather in our unrighteousness that makes us resent our particular providence.

The profound news of the gospel is that whatever bad things happen to us in this life, God does *not* judge us as Christians on the basis of our own ways but rather on the basis of Christ's righteousness. The gospel is therefore good news to the despairing. Since God has loved us so profoundly as to send Jesus to die on the cross for us, what will he not give to us? The bruised reed he will not break; the smoldering wick he will not extinguish.

This was the painful truth to which Horatio Spafford testified in his famous hymn, "It Is Well With My Soul." After the death of his only son, he suffered the loss of his business holdings in the Great Fire of Chicago in 1871. Just two years later, his wife and four daughters were on board a passenger ship that sank in mid-Atlantic; only his wife survived. In a short period, virtually his entire world had been destroyed. Yet as he sailed to be with his wife, at the very spot where his daughters had drowned, he wrote these immortal words of faith in God's goodness to his people, no matter what happens:

When peace like a river attendeth my way, When sorrows like sea billows roll, Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, "It is well, it is well with my soul."

Chorus:

It is well with my soul, It is well, it is well with my soul. Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come, Let this blest assurance control: That Christ has regarded my helpless estate, And has shed his own blood for my soul.

My sin—O, the bliss of this glorious thought, My sin—not in part but the whole, Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more: Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

And, Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight, The clouds be rolled back as a scroll, The trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend: Even so—it is well with my soul.

Ezekiel 34

THE WORD OF THE LORD came to me: 2"Son of man. prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? ³You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but vou do not take care of the flock. ⁴You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. ⁵So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. ⁶My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.

⁷" 'Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ⁸As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, ⁹therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ¹⁰This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.

11" 'For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.

¹²As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. ¹³I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. ¹⁴I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. ¹⁶I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

17" 'As for you, my flock, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats. ¹⁸Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? ¹⁹Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet?

²⁰" 'Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says to them: See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away, ²²I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another. ²³I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be

their shepherd. ²⁴I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken.

25" 'I will make a covenant of peace with them and rid the land of wild beasts so that they may live in the desert and sleep in the forests in safety. ²⁶I will bless them and the places surrounding my hill. I will send down showers in season; there will be showers of blessing. ²⁷The trees of the field will yield their fruit and the ground will yield its crops; the people will be secure in their land. They will know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke and rescue them from the hands of those who enslaved them. ²⁸They will no longer be plundered by the nations, nor will wild animals devour them. They will live in safety, and no one will make them afraid. ²⁹I will provide for them a land renowned for its crops, and they will no longer be victims of famine in the land or bear the scorn of the nations. ³⁰Then they will know that I, the LORD their God, am with them and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, declares the Sovereign LORD. ³¹You my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, are people, and I am your God, declares the Sovereign LORD.'"

Original Meaning

EZEKIEL 34 IS a dual oracle of judgment and salvation. It is an oracle of judgment on the shepherds and fat sheep who have oppressed the flock, and of salvation for the rest of the flock through the personal intervention of the Lord as their shepherd.

This chapter opens with an oracle against "the shepherds of Israel" (34:1–16). The title *shepherd* was a well-known ascription of both kings and gods in the ancient Near East. For example, the second millennium Babylonian king Hammurabi describes himself as "the shepherd who brings salvation and whose staff is righteous," while his much later successor

Merodoch-Baladan II is called "the shepherd who gathers together again those who have strayed." Frequently, in this role the earthly king stood as a representative of the divine shepherd who had appointed him. A similar notion of the relationship between the king and God was present in Israel. Thus, when the tribes came to David at Hebron to make him king over them, the basis of their action was the Lord's declaration concerning David: "You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler" (2 Sam. 5:2).

In Ezekiel's oracle of judgment, however, the Lord is coming *against* his shepherds—the former kings of Judah—because they have failed to fulfill their role of shepherd properly. The proper task of a shepherd was to care for the flock, that is, to protect it from dangers on the outside and dissension within—gathering those who strayed, leading the flock to good pasture and clean drinking water, and taking special care of the poor and the weak. On the contrary, these shepherds have viewed their position as an opportunity for personal gain, ruling harshly and brutally, feeding only themselves, not the flock, and even slaughtering the choicest animals (Ezek. 34:2–6). The phrase "to rule . . . brutally" (34:4) is only found in two other passages in the Old Testament. In Exodus 1:13–14 it refers to the way the Egyptians treated their Hebrew slaves, while in Leviticus 25:43, 46 it is forbidden to treat a fellow Israelite in this manner. Ezekiel thus accuses the "rulers of doing what their own history should have taught them to abhor and what the law of Moses expressly forbade."

Because of the shepherds' sinful self-interest, judgment is coming on them (Ezek. 34:7–10). In the absence of a true shepherd, the flock has been scattered and plundered (34:8). But now the Lord will step in and remove the false shepherds from their office so that they can no longer feed themselves at the flock's expense. Their shepherding will be brought to an end as the Lord acts to rescue his sheep (34:10). Now the Lord will himself search out the flock and take care of them, gathering them from all the places where they were scattered (34:12).

This metaphorical image of shepherd and sheep is made from a concrete promise of return from exile in verse 13: "I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land." The day of clouds and darkness when

they were scattered, the day of judgment,⁴ is over; now they can look forward to a return to the "mountains of Israel," the heart of the Promised Land. There they will experience the full blessing of the Lord's shepherding: He will feed them on rich pasture and cause them to lie down in safety; he will search for the lost and bind up the injured; he will establish justice, punishing the oppressors and strengthening the weak (34:16).

This last thought leads into a further oracle of judgment (34:17–22) against the "rams and goats" (v. 17) or the "fat sheep" (v. 20). These are the broader class of leaders of the community, who had oppressed the weak with violence and grasped the limited resources for themselves without considering the needs of those without influence or power.⁵ Even what they did not need for themselves they spoiled, thus denying it to others (vv. 18–19). They had abandoned the traditional responsibility of the upper class for the social well-being of the other classes.⁶ In the desperate times leading up to the Exile, the weakest went to the wall. To prevent that happening again in future, the Lord will intervene to execute judgment within his flock, judging between sheep and sheep (v. 22). He will thus deal with both external and internal dangers to the peace and security of his flock.⁷

As elsewhere in Ezekiel, we see in this chapter a double critique of the failures of the past: the divine response of punishing those responsible and the divine promise of intervention to reverse those failures.⁸ In concrete form, the intervention takes the form of setting up over them "one shepherd, my servant David," who will act as their "prince" (nās î, 34:23–24). This figure of a nās î is often taken as something less than a king, a kind of "apolitical messiah," who rules "among" rather than "over" the people.⁹ However, such a stress fails to note that the new shepherd *is* placed over the people (34:23). His relationship to them is not simply *primus inter pares* (first among equals) but shepherd to sheep, a relationship that involves authority as well as service.

Indeed, the change to be wrought in Israel's situation is not so much a change in the nature of the office as in the nature of the occupant. God's solution to a history of bad shepherds is not to replace shepherding with a better system, but to replace the bad shepherds with a good shepherd.¹⁰ This good shepherd will be like the great king David, the king after God's own

heart (1 Sam. 13:14), the archetypal picture of a strong king ruling with justice and fairness.¹¹

This future ruler is not merely an ad hoc solution to the necessities of governing the restored people. On the contrary, it is nothing less than the fulfillment of the covenant with David. God promised David that he would "raise up" (Hiphil of *qwm*) his offspring to succeed him and that he would establish his kingdom (2 Sam. 7:12, 25). Solomon subsequently received the promise that, if he followed the pattern of his father David, his throne would be established (Hiphil of *qwm*) forever. Now that dynastic oracle will be fulfilled with the raising up (Hiphil of *qwm*) of a new David (Ezek. 34:23; cf. Jer. 33:14; Amos 9:11), who would be the Lord's servant and his people's shepherd.

In addition, the Lord will make "a covenant of peace" with his flock (Ezek. 34:25). In place of the curses of the Sinai covenant, which they have experienced while being under the judgment of God—wild animals, drought, famine, and the sword (Lev. 26:14–35)—they will now experience the blessings of the covenant: safety, rain in its season, fruitfulness, and peace (Ezek. 26:4–13). The state of experiencing the blessings that flow from a harmonious relationship with God is what makes this distinctively a "covenant of peace."

This covenant is thus not so much a "new" covenant as it is the experience of the blessings promised in the original covenant. In place of the monarchy divided by sin, God's people will be united under one shepherd. In place of an undistinguished procession of monarchs, they will be given a ruler after God's own heart, a new David. In place of famine, plague, drought, and the sword, they will see a new level of peace and prosperity so that they will no longer bear the reproach of the nations (Ezek. 34:29). Then indeed they will know that the Lord their God is with them—for blessing and not for curse—and that they are his people. They will be his sheep and he will be their God, the harmonious relationship celebrated in Psalm 100:3.

Bridging Contexts

THE SHEPHERD METAPHOR. Who is my shepherd? The answer to that question should be known even by Sunday school children. As Psalm 23:1

affirms: "The LORD is my shepherd." But the New Testament unfolds the answer further when Jesus asserts in John 10:11: "I am the good shepherd." Jesus is the tough yet tender leader of his flock, who protects his sheep against the dangers of marauders and knows each one by name (10:11–14). He is the one shepherd who unites in himself his flock (10:16). He is the good shepherd, who leaves the ninety-nine sheep on the hillside to search for the one lost sheep, and when it is found, brings it home rejoicing (Luke 15:4–6). Jesus is also the discerning shepherd, who separates the sheep from the goats on the final Day of Judgment (Matt. 25:32).

However, just as in the Old Testament the notion of God as the Chief Shepherd was combined with that of the king as the shepherd of the people, so also Christ presently rules through the leaders of the church, who are appointed as undershepherds (1 Peter 5:2–4). As Peter makes clear, this is a position that combines authority with service: They are to "oversee" the flock but not "lord it" over them. Unlike the bad shepherds of Ezekiel 34, they are not to serve for their own benefit. Like the Chief Shepherd, they will have to be on the lookout for marauding wolves while watching tenderly over the flock, committed to their care (Acts 20:28–29).

It is this special combination of toughness and tenderness that the image of shepherd is uniquely fitted to convey. Of the two aspects, the toughness involved in being a shepherd is easily missed today. We must heed the helpful insight of Alastair Campbell: "[In the Bible, the shepherd's] unsettled and dangerous life makes him a slightly ambiguous figure—more perhaps like the cowboy of the 'Wild West' than the modern shepherd in a settled farming community."¹⁴

The blessings of the new covenant. In addition, we should note that the blessings of the covenant we experience as Christians are different from those that believers experienced under the old covenant because we have a different relationship to the land in which we live. For them, the land of Canaan was in a special way "God's land," which they inhabited as his tenants. For that reason, the fertility of the land functioned, in Chris Wright's phrase, as a "spiritual thermometer" of the relationship between Israel and her God. When they were obedient to their covenant obligations, God's goodness was demonstrated in rainfall and abundant harvests; when they were disobedient, his displeasure made itself manifest in the lack of these things (Deut. 28). This provided a pictorial prefiguring of the final

eschatological state of blessing for the righteous and curse for the covenant-breakers.¹⁶

Under the new covenant, what is decisive for us as Christians is the perfect obedience of Christ in our place (Heb. 2:17–18; 4:15–16). For this reason, even though by nature we are covenant-breakers, we may still possess every spiritual blessing in Christ (Eph. 1:3). The heart of these blessings is nothing less than peace, life in all its fullness. Now we have peace with God and with our fellow human beings, as Jews and Gentiles united together in Christ, who is our peace (2:14). Through his death on the cross, those who were once in separate sheepfolds—those "far away" and those "near" (2:13)—have now been welded into a single flock, "one new man" (2:15). Through that death, this peace is already a present reality in our lives (Rom. 5:1).

However, at present we only experience that blessing in a partial way; our lives are an ongoing struggle against sin, and we continue to live in a fallen world. This world is a place of ongoing tribulation (John 16:33). Sometimes those trials are the result of our own disobedience, sometimes not. Sometimes obedience results in material blessing, sometimes in persecution and hardship. But even in the midst of the trials of this life we may yet experience incomprehensible peace and inexpressible joy because of the nearness of the Shepherd (Phil. 4:5, 7).

Contemporary Significance

CEO or PASTOR? In the contemporary church, the image of minister as shepherd is rapidly becoming an endangered species. Our models of leadership are increasingly borrowed from business. In place of the traditional view of the minister as a "pastor," the minister is now viewed as the equivalent of the CEO of a major corporation or, to continue the agricultural metaphor, as a "rancher" overseeing a large sheep-producing enterprise. It is argued, perhaps correctly, that only thus can large churches be established and maintained.

But what is the theological cost of viewing ministry as management and pastors as professional organizers, albeit in charge of spiritual organizations? What is lost in the switch is the biblical vision of the pastor as a shepherd of a flock of souls. Such a vision is far from being a

peripheral matter; in Thomas Oden's words, the shepherd image is the "pivotal analogy" for leadership in the Scriptures. ¹⁸ As we have moved from being pastors to ranchers, we have traded in the vocation of handcrafting saints for the business of mass-producing sheep. ¹⁹

But what does it mean for a pastor to be a shepherd? It is a unique combination of afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted. The bad shepherds of Ezekiel 34 were criticized because they ignored the fat sheep who were oppressing the other sheep, while they lived comfortably off the products of the flock. In contrast, the good shepherd will both confront the fat sheep and tenderly care for the weak sheep (34:16).

Most of us who are shepherds fall far short of this standard. Sometimes, we don't challenge those who are comfortable for fear of stirring up conflict—after all, the fat sheep are often big givers who underwrite the church's budget (and pay our salaries). Nor do we always comfort the weak sheep as we should. Taking care of the weak sheep is hard, painful, time-consuming work, and we have been told that there are more important things to do with our time. As a result, we gradually turn into managers of the flock, and as long as the flock is growing in numbers, no one around us complains. God is against such shepherds, however. He is the one to whom we are ultimately accountable, and what will it profit us if we grow a sizable megachurch, yet neglect our calling to shepherd the sheep? We will stand under his condemnation.

The good shepherd. The good shepherd will know his flock by name; he will know their strengths and their weaknesses, their joys and their sorrows. He will be there to share in the joy of their wedding celebrations, to celebrate the birth of their children, to comfort them in their sickness, and to be there when they die. Like being a watchman, being a shepherd is a heavily responsible task; it is not a job where you punch in and out and work "professional hours" (see Gen. 31:38–40). But it is also a profoundly rewarding task. Who else gets to share in all of these profoundly important moments in people's lives? Who else gets to shape and influence people's lives in such a deeply significant way?

If we are to return to truly being shepherds, perhaps we need to reconsider our love affair with big churches. It is possible to lord it over a flock of thousands; it is possible to herd a flock of hundreds; but is it really possible to pastor a congregation of more than about two hundred?²⁰ At the

very least, within larger churches we need consciously to create subcongregations of this size or smaller, in which real shepherding takes place, where loving concern and care is expressed and strong, scriptural accountability is exercised.

In our organizational chart, someone must be shepherding our sheep. Moreover, the leader of the larger congregation must resist the pressures to retreat into the role of superstar preacher or of vision-casting executive. Though such people may not be able to shepherd all of the people all of the time, they should certainly be shepherding *some* of the people all of the time and *all* of the people some of the time. Otherwise, there is a real danger that contemporary pastors will lose touch with their sheep and they with them.²¹

Jesus, the model. In all of this, Jesus is our supreme model of what it means to shepherd the flock. He did not act as the rancher of a large herd, comfortably managing a megaflock from a distance through intermediaries. He picked a small group of twelve disciples and lived together with them in a way that completely changed their lives. He ate with them and slept with them; he sweated with them and sat with them; he laughed with them and cried with them. He was their pastor.

In addition, Jesus also had a ministry to a larger group of people, to the thousands who followed him around. He confronted the self-righteous Pharisees boldly, pointing out how far the righteousness of which they were so proud fell short of God's standards. But the needs of the multitudes moved him to compassion, for he saw that they were "like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt. 9:36). As a result, he was never too busy to sit with ordinary people, even with tax collectors and sinners, finding out their concerns and worries while pointing them to their deeper spiritual needs.

In Jesus we see the perfect balance of comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable that is the shepherd's task. He afflicted the comfortable. That is, to those who relied on their own righteousness, he was unmerciful in tearing away the fig leaves of their excuses, driving them to see their utter need of the gospel. But he also comforted the afflicted. The sinners and outcasts did not need to have the law preached to them; they had heard it too often on the lips of the Pharisees. They needed instead to be drawn to God. They needed to hear that God did not delight in their extermination but rather was wooing them to come to him so that they

might live. They needed to know that there was a place in his flock for the adulterer and homosexual, the alcoholic and the drug addict.

Most of us who are pastors will naturally gravitate toward one style of pastoral ministry or the other. By temperament, we typically either draw people to Christ or we drive them to Christ. But the image of the shepherd calls us to a richer, more balanced view of our calling: as drawers and drivers, drivers and drawers, by all means winning those whom God, the Great Shepherd, is adding to his flock.

Jesus, the fulfillment of Ezekiel 34. But Jesus is not merely the model shepherd who makes contemporary pastors feel guilty by how far short we fall. He is himself the One of whom Ezekiel 34 speaks. He is the One in whom all the covenants of the Old Testament find their fulfillment. He is the ultimate Shepherd-King, who fulfills the Davidic covenant, as the crowds recognized during his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:9). He fulfills the Mosaic covenant both as the Lawgiver, who speaks his authoritative word from the mountain (Matt. 5–7), and also as the One who has come to fulfill the law given from Sinai (Matt. 5:17). He is the Second Adam, who through his obedient life, death, and resurrection fulfills the covenant of creation (1 Cor. 15:45–49). He is the One who ushers in for his people the blessings of the covenant by being the covenant-keeper in our place. In him, we have peace with God; in him, we have peace with one another; in him, all creation finds peace.

All of these blessings have both a "now" and a "not yet" aspect to them. We see them in part now, but we do not yet see them in all their fullness. Creation still groans with anticipation as it awaits the revelation of the new heavens and the new earth and of ourselves as sons and daughters of God (Rom. 8:19–23). In the meantime our experience frequently continues to be "trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword" (8:35). But these are momentary light afflictions in comparison to the glory that awaits us (8:18). One day Christ will return, and all will be gloriously fulfilled as God gathers his worldwide flock from many nations into his presence. Then there will be no more suffering, no more pain, no more disharmony with God, my neighbor, or the world. As Revelation 7:17 puts it:

For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd;

he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Ezekiel 35:1-36:15

THE WORD OF THE LORD came to me: ²"Son of man, set your face against Mount Seir; prophesy against it ³and say: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against you, Mount Seir, and I will stretch out my hand against you and make you a desolate waste. ⁴I will turn your towns into ruins and you will be desolate. Then you will know that I am the LORD.

5" 'Because you harbored an ancient hostility and delivered the Israelites over to the sword at the time of their calamity, the time their punishment reached its climax, ⁶therefore as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I will give you over to bloodshed and it will pursue you. Since you did not hate bloodshed, bloodshed will pursue you. ⁷I will make Mount Seir a desolate waste and cut off from it all who come and go. ⁸I will fill your mountains with the slain; those killed by the sword will fall on your hills and in your valleys and in all your ravines. ⁹I will make you desolate forever; your towns will not be inhabited. Then you will know that I am the LORD.

10" 'Because you have said, "These two nations and countries will be ours and we will take possession of them," even though I the LORD was there, ¹¹therefore as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I will treat you in accordance with the anger and jealousy you showed in your hatred of them and I will make myself known among them when I judge you. ¹²Then you will know that I the LORD have heard all the contemptible things you have said against the mountains of Israel. You said, "They have been laid waste and have been given over to us to devour." ¹³You boasted against me and

spoke against me without restraint, and I heard it. ¹⁴This is what the Sovereign LORD says: While the whole earth rejoices, I will make you desolate. ¹⁵Because you rejoiced when the inheritance of the house of Israel became desolate, that is how I will treat you. You will be desolate, O Mount Seir, you and all of Edom. Then they will know that I am the LORD.'"

^{36:1}"Son of man, prophesy to the mountains of Israel and say, 'O mountains of Israel, hear the word of the LORD. ²This is what the Sovereign LORD says: The enemy said of you, "Aha! The ancient heights have become our possession." '3 Therefore prophesy and say, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Because they ravaged and hounded you from every side so that you became the possession of the rest of the nations and the object of people's malicious talk and slander, 4therefore, O mountains of Israel, hear the word of the Sovereign LORD: This is what the Sovereign LORD says to the mountains and hills, to the ravines and valleys, to the desolate ruins and the deserted towns that have been plundered and ridiculed by the rest of the nations around vou—⁵this is what the Sovereign LORD says: In my burning zeal I have spoken against the rest of the nations, and against all Edom, for with glee and with malice in their hearts they made my land their own possession so that they might plunder its pastureland.' ⁶Therefore prophesy concerning the land of Israel and say to the mountains and hills, to the ravines and valleys: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I speak in my jealous wrath because you have suffered the scorn of the nations. ⁷Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I swear with uplifted hand that the nations around you will also suffer scorn.

8" 'But you, O mountains of Israel, will produce branches and fruit for my people Israel, for they will soon come home. 9I am concerned for you and will look on you with favor; you will be plowed and sown, 10 and I will multiply the number of people upon you, even the whole house of Israel. The towns will be inhabited and the ruins rebuilt. 11 will increase the number of men and animals upon you, and they will be fruitful and become numerous. I will settle people on you as in the past and will make you prosper more than before. Then you will know that I am the LORD. 12 will cause people, my people Israel, to walk upon you. They will possess you, and you will be their inheritance; you will never again deprive them of their children.

13" 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Because people say to you, "You devour men and deprive your nation of its children," ¹⁴therefore you will no longer devour men or make your nation childless, declares the Sovereign LORD. ¹⁵No longer will I make you hear the taunts of the nations, and no longer will you suffer the scorn of the peoples or cause your nation to fall, declares the Sovereign LORD.'"

Original Meaning

EZEKIEL 35 COMPRISES an oracle against the nation of Edom, under the figure of its central mountain, Mount Seir. At first sight, it might seem out of place among the surrounding chapters that speak of Israel's restoration. Ezekiel had already delivered a brief oracle against Edom in the oracles against the foreign nations (25:12–14), where Edom appears as one of the seven hostile neighbors of God's people. However, this larger oracle against Edom is linked together with the oracle that follows it (36:1–15) as a pair of contrasting panels of darkness and light.

Having spoken of the restoration of the monarchy in chapter 34, the central feature of the Davidic covenant, Ezekiel now addresses the future of the land of Canaan, the central feature of the covenant with Abraham. The issue at stake between Israel and Edom is nothing less than the possession of the Promised Land. As in chapter 34, where the prophet begins by critiquing the existing bad situation and announcing judgment on it (the panel of doom), after which he announces a message of the reversal of the situation (the panel of salvation), so here first comes doom pronounced on Mount Seir, followed by salvation pronounced on the mountains of Israel. The judgment of Edom is a necessary prerequisite for the restoration of Judah.

The chapter opens with an address through the prophet against Mount Seir, the symbol of Edom (35:2). Edom, the nation to the southeast of Judah, had apparently taken advantage of the power vacuum left by the destruction of Jerusalem to move into Judean territory and take it over. Her fortunes seemed on the rise, but that was not God's final word. Ultimately, God would act to bring Edom down. The Lord declared that judgment would come on Mount Seir, so that she would become "a desolate waste" (35:3), exactly the same fate he had earlier brought on the mountains of Israel (6:14).³

The reason for God's judgment is given in 35:5: Because of the "ancient hostility" ('ébat-'ôlām) between the two nations, the Edomites gave the Israelites over to the sword in their time of judgment. This hostility reached all the way back to the time of their progenitors, Jacob and Esau (also known as Edom), as recorded in Genesis 27–28. Even the establishment of peace between these two individuals (Gen. 33) did not allay the deep-seated grievances among their descendants, which stretched down throughout history, amplified rather than diminished by the passage of time. Thus, when Judah was under God's wrath and Jerusalem was judged, Edom saw an opportunity to reclaim the stolen birthright by helping the Babylonians. But their animosity will rebound on their own heads, says the Lord. Because of their "bloodthirsty hatred" (Ezek. 35:6), blood will in turn pursue them until they are utterly cut off. To match their perpetual enmity toward Israel, now they will become "desolate forever" (*simmôt-'ôlām*, 35:9).

The source of Edom's perpetual enmity toward God's people becomes clear in 35:10. The Edomites desired to possess the two lands of Israel and Judah for themselves and thus to reclaim by force the stolen birthright, in spite of the Lord's past presence there. This ambition will be thwarted by the Lord's intervention to protect the honor of his own name, which was linked to the gift of Canaan to his people (35:11–12; cf. Ex. 32:11–14). Far from their possessing the traditional Israelite inheritance, their own inheritance will be wiped out; just as they rejoiced at Israel's downfall, many nations will rejoice at theirs (Ezek. 35:15). Then indeed they will know that the Lord is the One who stands behind the assignment of the land of Canaan to Israel as a lasting inheritance (Num. 34:2); his present abandonment of the land is not permanent.

Lasting possession of the land is not achieved by Edomite power, nor indeed by Jacob's tricky strategies, but by sovereign divine election, backed up by the Lord's commitment to honor his own name (Ezek. 35:11). It is that divine election that makes the mountains of Israel the permanent "inheritance of the house of Israel" (35:15). Though the vassal Israel has been temporarily removed, the land of Canaan remains the rightful property of the Lord. The living God will not be mocked or trifled with (35:13). Edom's foolish boasting will ultimately be seen as the empty words of the godless, who think to overthrow God's kingdom, only to find themselves the object first of God's mirth and then of his wrath (Ps. 2).

If Ezekiel 35 gives the dark side of the future (i.e., the destruction of presently ascendant Edom), 36:1–15 gives the bright side: the return of God's people to the land of promise. The address to the "mountains of Israel" parallels the address to Mount Seir, as well as the earlier oracle of destruction to those selfsame mountains in chapter 6. Whereas Edom sought to possess the mountains of Israel, the "ancient heights" (*bāmôt 'ôlām*, 36:2), and will be brought down to the depths, Israel will return to possess the land that is now in the hands of many nations (36:3).

It becomes clear as the oracle progresses that Edom in Ezekiel 35 is merely one representative of the nations at large who oppose Israel and her God.⁷ Her fate is therefore representative of all who oppose God's plan; all who seek to benefit from Israel's misfortune will meet the same end at the hands of Israel's jealous God (36:5). Though the promise of the land to Israel may at present be in abeyance because of Israel's unfaithfulness, it

has not been abrogated and ultimately will be fulfilled because of the Lord's concern for his name.8

Whereas in the past God's jealousy and wrath were poured out on the mountains of Israel so that they became the object of scorn for the nations, that scorn will be returned on the head of the nations (36:7). Israel has once again become "my people" ('ammî, 36:8). The mountains of Israel will burst forth with a primeval fruitfulness as the Lord turns his face toward them in blessing (36:9). People and animals will multiply and be fruitful for the Israelites (36:11), an echo of the creation mandate in Genesis 1:28. This re-creation will not merely be a return to the former status quo but will be something even better than their original state (36:11).

Historically, the mountains of Israel had not always been experienced as a land that "does flow with milk and honey" (Num. 13:27). Sometimes it had seemed to be, as the ten timid spies falsely reported, a "land [that] devours those living in it" (13:32). But just as this report was essentially false then, so also it continued to be false as it was repeated by the nations around Israel (Ezek. 36:13). The mountains of Israel, Israel's heartland, would once again be a place of prosperity and blessing, experiencing the positive fruits of divine election; no longer would it be a barren and undesirable place, under God's curse because of the people's unfaithfulness to their covenant overlord.

Bridging Contexts

EDOM AS A theological entity. To contemporary readers, Edom is a geographical entity, not a theological one. It may be faintly recognized as the name of one of Israel's neighboring states, and the diligent student or pastor may even be interested enough to look it up on the map printed in the back of a Bible to ascertain its precise location. But this approach misses the theological overtones that the term *Edom* had for the ancient reader. Edom was not merely another bothersome neighbor, engaged in occasional border skirmishes over disputed territory; Edom was *the* archetype of the nonelect, the very paragon of a nation raging against the Lord and against his anointed.

This relationship of antagonism between Israel and Edom was longstanding. It extended all the way back to the founders of the two

nations, Jacob and Esau, who struggled with one another in the womb (Gen. 25:22). It was revealed to their mother, Rebekah, that this struggle was not a simple brotherly squabble, such as is known to all those who have more than one son, but was rather the consequence of a profound theological difference. The Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger" (25:23). In other words, the Lord had chosen for the line of promise to descend through the younger son, Jacob, so that the path of blessing for the older son, Esau, would lie in submitting to God's choice.

Unfortunately, Esau was not willing to follow that path. Although he counted his birthright and the promise that (humanly speaking) went with it such a light thing that he was willing to trade it for a bowl of stew (Gen. 25:29–34), yet when Jacob craftily tricked him out of his father's blessing, his thoughts turned to murder (27:41). Of course, Jacob himself was far from blameless in all of this; he was seeking to attain the promise by strategy rather than by faith. But from before the outset of his life, Esau appears as a man passed over by God, uninterested in the things of God and antagonistic toward the chosen line.

This remained Edom's subsequent posture toward Israel. When the Israelites were coming up out of Egypt, they asked simply for right of passage through Edomite territory, offering to pay for whatever they consumed. The Edomites, however, refused and sent out a large army to turn them back (Num. 20:14–21). Later on, in the time of David, the tables were turned, and Edom was conquered by Israel (2 Sam. 8:14). They remained subject to Israel until the time of Jehoram, at which point they rebelled and reestablished their independence (2 Kings 8:20). Given that history, it is perhaps understandable that they rejoiced over the fall of Jerusalem and cheered on the Babylonian destroyers (Ps. 137:7). But to oppose God's chosen people and to rejoice at their fall is to incur God's wrath, a wrath that in due time will be poured out on Edom as an example to all who oppose God.

Thus, when Isaiah depicts the coming world-shaking judgment on all nations, his language moves from cosmic destruction to the devastation of Edom (Isa. 34:2–10). Edom will be consigned to the eternally unquenchable lake of fire, whose smoke ascends forever and ever (Isa. 34:9–10), a

judgment that is preparatory to God's ultimate acts of cosmic salvation (Isa. 63). Likewise, in Malachi 1, the ultimate proof of God's love for Israel is the destruction of Edom, who is termed "the Wicked Land, a people always under the wrath of the LORD" (Mal. 1:4; cf. Obad.). None of this extreme language can be properly understood outside the representative role of Edom as the symbol of the nonelect, who perpetually range themselves against the Lord and his people and will ultimately face the consequences.

This ongoing conflict provides the background for Paul's use of the example of Jacob and Esau in Romans 9. Paul appeals to the two brothers as an example of sovereign election: God chose Jacob over Esau before the twins had done anything good or bad (Rom. 9:11). Jacob is the archetype of the one chosen by God for blessing in spite of who he was; Esau is the archetype of the nonelect, passed over by God, who then proceeds to live out his life in enmity toward God and his people. The fruit of election is salvation by grace for the elect; the fruit of reprobation is a life of enmity against God that leads to final judgment. Both of these outcomes are, however, the result of the antecedent decision of God to have mercy on those on whom he will have mercy and to harden those whom he will harden (9:18).

Yet even though Edom as a nation is implacably opposed to God, the Lord's electing mercy is still experienced by individuals from that nation. For Deuteronomy 23:7–8 declares: "Do not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother. . . . The third generation of children born to them may enter the assembly of the LORD." In other words, even the "hated" Edomite may be engrafted into the family tree of Israel, and the one who was "not my people" by grace may yet become "my people" (cf. Hos. 2:23). The electing grace of God knows no limits.

The land of Israel as a theological entity. In contrast to the destruction to be poured out on Edom and thus on all that Edom represents, the land of Israel is promised unparalleled fertility. Should we see a fulfillment of this in the present agricultural development of the desert areas of Palestine? To do so is to miss the significance of the Edenic overtones of the promise. It is not merely fruitfulness that is being promised to the mountains of Israel but specifically a return to the Eden-like conditions of blessing that accompany the presence of the Lord in the midst of his people. What is promised is nothing short of complete fulfillment of the blessings promised to the

patriarch Abraham, of a land and its people blessed by the immediate presence of their God.¹⁰

The multiplication of people envisaged by Ezekiel (Ezek. 36:10–12) finds a partial fulfillment in the adding of multitudes to the kingdom of God through the carrying out of the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19). This is the New Testament analogue of the creation mandate given to humanity in Eden to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28). Its ultimate fulfillment, however, still lies in the future, where the Edenic fruitfulness of the earth will be restored in the new heavens and a new earth, where God's presence is in the midst of his people forever (Rev. 21:1–3).

Contemporary Significance

ALL IS OF God's electing grace. God's people have never lacked for enemies. Throughout history, there have always been those only too eager to oppose and hurt God's chosen ones. At times, it may seem as if the oppressors of the church have the upper hand and are about to crush her utterly. How can believers know for sure during those hard times that such an outcome can never happen? The answer is the assurance of God's election and promise. God has determined from all eternity to save a people for himself, and that purpose must stand in spite of all that the forces of the evil one can throw against it.

Our assurance cannot rest on our own merits and strength or on our heredity; God did not choose Jacob because he was better than Esau or Israel because she was better than Edom. He chose them simply because of his own good pleasure and purpose. Nor did he choose the nation of Israel because he foresaw that they would be strong enough to withstand the fiery furnace of trials. Rather, in Israel's case they were in the fiery furnace precisely because of their own long history of sin. Not all the descendants of Israel are part of the true Israel (Rom. 9:6). Even some who by descent are from the elect people will prove themselves to be nonelect individuals by their unrepentant sin. Some of the vine branches will refuse to abide in the vine, to their own eternal destruction (John 15:6).

But in spite of Israel's sin and rebellion against God, the honor of his name required him to act to preserve for himself a people. Astonishingly, the way in which he has chosen to do so is by engrafting the Gentiles into a new nonethnic entity, the true Israel of God (Rom. 11:17, 26; Gal. 6:16). We were engrafted into the vine not because we chose him but because he chose us to bear lasting fruit for him (John 15:16). All is of grace, even our fruitfulness, so that no one can boast in the presence of God.

Hatred from the world. Even while we are assured of God's love, however, we may rest equally assured of the world's hatred. It will hate us because it hated our master, Jesus, first (John 15:18). Esau cannot abide God's election of Jacob, and the world cannot abide God's love for his saints. We do not belong to the world or fit in it; therefore, we should expect the world to exhibit an "eternal hostility" toward us for the sake of Christ (cf. John 15:20–21).

Those who oppose God and arrogantly attempt to injure his people face the certainty of judgment, however. God will act to protect his own people, and even where he temporarily withholds his protecting hand and allows painful experiences to befall us, that is not God's ultimate word. Jesus' ultimate word to those who are his people is, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance" (Matt. 25:34). By contrast, his ultimate word to those who oppose him is, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (25:41).

There is, literally, no future in fighting God. This is true not simply for the irreligious Edomite, but for the most sincerely religious individuals who range themselves against God's people. Edom's problem was not that they lacked sincerity in their religious beliefs in their gods, but rather that their sincerely held beliefs were misguided. In the experience of the outpouring of God's wrath on them, they would come at last to acknowledge the painful truth of the reality and power of Israel's God, the Lord (Ezek. 35:15).

We can be thankful, however, that just as "not all who are descended from Israel are Israel" (Rom. 9:6; in other words, not all of the elect nation are elect individuals), so also not all who are descended from Edom are Edom (i.e., not all those who wickedly oppose God are headed for eternal torment). Otherwise, we would all be lost. But alongside God's sternness exists his mercy (11:22). God's present patience with unbelievers serves his purposes in election, for some of those who are at present blasphemers against God and persecutors of the church will ultimately be found among

the elect, trophies of redeeming grace, which can extend even to darkest Edom.

The apostle Paul himself was evidence of this powerful work of God (1 Tim. 1:13), and church history abounds with similar examples. To give just one, the very Auca Indians who speared to death Jim Elliot and his four friends—missionaries who had come to share the gospel with them—were subsequently converted and discipled through the ministry of two of the widows, Elisabeth Elliot and Rachel Saint. Those who once sought to destroy the gospel of God were by grace ultimately brought to love the same gospel."

Properly understood, this electing grace of God should cause us as Christians to be lost in wonder, love, and praise that we have been chosen by God to become part of his people. We have been chosen not because of anything in us or because of what we can do for him, but simply because of his mercy. We who were once not his people have by grace been incorporated into the community of God's saints. As former Edomites who have been engrafted into the Israel of God, we of all people should therefore sing Charles Wesley's great hymn with renewed amazement:

And can it be, that I should gain an interest in the Savior's blood?Died He for me, who caused His pain?For me, who Him to death pursued?Amazing love! How can it be?That Thou, my God should'st die for me?

Ezekiel 36:16–38

AGAIN THE WORD of the LORD came to me: 17"Son of man, when the people of Israel were living in their own land, they defiled it by their conduct and their actions. Their conduct was like a woman's monthly uncleanness in my sight. ¹⁸So I poured out my wrath on them because they had shed blood in the land and because they had defiled it with their idols. ¹⁹I dispersed them among the nations, and they were scattered through the countries; I judged them according to their conduct and their actions. ²⁰And wherever they went among the nations they profaned my holy name, for it was said of them, 'These are the LORD's people, and yet they had to leave his land.' ²¹I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel profaned among the nations where they had gone.

²²"Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. ²³I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Sovereign LORD, when I show myself holy through you before their eyes.

²⁴" 'For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. ²⁵I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. ²⁶I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in

you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. ²⁸You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God. ²⁹I will save you from all your uncleanness. I will call for the grain and make it plentiful and will not bring famine upon you. ³⁰I will increase the fruit of the trees and the crops of the field, so that you will no longer suffer disgrace among the nations because of famine. ³¹Then you will remember your evil ways and wicked deeds, and you will loathe yourselves for your sins and detestable practices. ³²I want you to know that I am not doing this for your sake, declares the Sovereign LORD. Be ashamed and disgraced for your conduct, O house of Israel!

the day I cleanse you from all your sins, I will resettle your towns, and the ruins will be rebuilt. ³⁴The desolate land will be cultivated instead of lying desolate in the sight of all who pass through it. ³⁵They will say, "This land that was laid waste has become like the garden of Eden; the cities that were lying in ruins, desolate and destroyed, are now fortified and inhabited." ³⁶Then the nations around you that remain will know that I the LORD have rebuilt what was destroyed and have replanted what was desolate. I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it.'

³⁷"This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Once again I will yield to the plea of the house of Israel and do this for them: I will make their people as numerous as sheep, ³⁸as numerous as the flocks for offerings at Jerusalem during her appointed feasts.

So will the ruined cities be filled with flocks of people. Then they will know that I am the LORD."

Original Meaning

IT IS NOT ENOUGH for God merely to give Israel a new shepherd-leader and a renewed land. The nation had had good kings in the past and had lived in the land God had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But the people themselves had proved unworthy to inhabit the land. A total transformation was required if the regathering and return were to be a success. It is this subject to which the prophet now turns, giving the reasons why judgment was necessary in the first place and the reasons why mercy will surely follow.

The prophet begins by pointing out the motivation for God's wrath in the past. The people, while they lived in their own land, polluted it by their actions (Ezek. 36:17). As a result they could not remain in God's presence and he could not remain in their midst. They were unclean, which the prophet describes in terms of the ceremonial uncleanness caused by menstruation. In the law of Moses, this process was considered defiling to a woman, making her unable to take part in religious activities (Lev. 15:19–24). This is not because it was in any sense sinful but because any contact with the realm of death, through the loss of bodily life-fluids (e.g., blood or semen) or through contact with a corpse, renders one unfit to be in contact with the realm of life. Communication with the living God through the various Old Testament means of grace was impossible as long as one was in a state of impurity as a result of contact with death.

What Israel had done while they lived in their land was to turn it into a permanent place of death, thoroughly defiling it by means of bloodshed and idolatry, making it a place unfit for divine habitation by the living God (Ezek. 36:18). God had no choice but to bring on them the curses of the covenant they had broken, in wrath scattering them among the nations, just as he had threatened when they first entered the land (Deut. 29:22–28).

This action, however, created a new problem for God. He had promised to bring this people, who were called by his name, into the land of Canaan to possess it. He had established a relationship between himself, his people, and the land. Yet now the nations could see that the Lord's people were

absent from his land (Ezek. 36:21). That three-way relationship had been broken. The conclusion drawn by the surrounding nations would be natural: The Lord's power was insufficient to bring about that which he promised.² He had given up on his people as a bad job. The final elimination of those people for their sins—what Moses had feared in Numbers 14:15–16 and had prayed against—had finally become a reality.³

Thus, as long as Israel was scattered among the nations, they continually profaned the divine name (Ezek. 36:20). This was now not because of anything particular they were doing, although there is no suggestion that the shock of exile in and of itself brought about a radical change in their behavior. Rather, they profaned God's name *simply by being in exile instead of in the land of promise*!⁴

All of which brings Ezekiel to the reasons for God's future mercy. If there had been no other reasoning involved for God than the necessity of dealing with Israel's sin, permanent wrath would have sufficed. Israel could simply and deservedly have been blotted out from the pages of history as an example of the power of God's holiness and his anger against sin. It is not because God shrinks from dealing out such judgment that he stays his hand from crushing Israel comprehensively and finally. After all, he had earlier repeatedly declared that he would not have compassion (hāmal) on sinners (5:11; 7:4; 8:18; 9:5, 10). As was the case for the people of Noah's day, the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, or the Amorites living in the land at the time of Joshua's assault, those whose sins were full could simply have been totally destroyed.

However, the Israelites of Ezekiel's day were not completely destroyed. Why not? Because though he has no compassion on them, God will nonetheless have concern (*ḥāmal*) for his name, which he had inextricably linked to Israel by entering covenant with them. Because of that sovereign, irrevocable act, mercy not only may but must be shown to Israel. The honor of God's name will be vindicated by a show of power among the nations when he brings Israel back to her land (36:21–23). The Lord will act, not for Israel's sake, but for the sake of his own name. The root of God's action in restoring his people is grounded not in his love (which might suggest something lovable about the object of his affections) but in a demonstration of his holiness.

But this act through which God's power is demonstrated involves not merely bringing Israel back physically to the land but also a total change in their nature. His people must be redeemed not merely outwardly but inwardly, effectively. Israel will indeed be gathered and returned from the nations to their own land (Ezek. 36:24). Then she will be sprinkled with clean water, symbolizing her cleansing from all her past impurities and idolatries, the things that had made the land unclean (36:25). In a similar way, Leviticus 15 prescribed washing with water to cleanse that which is unclean.

This outward act of initiation is then followed by a deeper, internal change, whereby Israel's heart and spirit will be made new. The "heart" and the "spirit" are the seats of thought and will from which actions flow. Unresponsive, unyielding stone will be replaced by warm, living, responsive flesh (Ezek. 36:26). That which has been defiled will be made clean. The Spirit of God, which brings life and power, will indwell them and create in them both the will and the ability to follow God's decrees and laws (36:27). Then, finally, they will be fit to live in God's land and be his people, and he in turn will not be ashamed to be called their God (36:28).

Then the Israelites will experience the blessings of the covenant, the fruitfulness of the land, rather than the covenant curse of famine that had made them a reproach among the nations (36:30). Such a salvation will not bring about pride in the renewed nation but rather a profound sense of shame, for they will realize that their salvation is not something they have merited or deserved in any sense. Rather, it is a free gift of sovereign grace. Nothing short of such radical divine intervention could have saved such a people.

In addition to the act of self-glorification that results in the restored people being returned to the land, God will also restore the land to a "better-than-original" state. It will become "like the garden of Eden," the ultimate symbol of fertility and fruitfulness (Ezek. 36:35; cf. Isa. 51:3; Joel 2:3). The garden land will be filled with restored cities; the places that once were torn down and desolate will be inhabited and fortified (Ezek. 36:35). In place of the one original 'ādām and his wife, the new garden land will be filled with "flocks of 'ādām," that is, numerous "people" who will fill the cities to overflowing (36:38). The fertility and fruitfulness will thus encompass the people as well as the land itself, to the point where it will be as crowded as

Jerusalem used to be on the great annual festivals, when her streets were crammed with a mass of people and animals (36:38).

The chief blessing, however, will be that God will once more be responsive to Israel's petitions. In the past, he refused to be sought by the elders of his adulterous people (14:3; 20:3). His face was turned away from them and no intercession was possible. But in the future, that too will change. As a mark of Israel's restored status as God's people, he will permit himself to be sought by them to act on their behalf (36:37). To adapt the familiar language of 2 Chronicles 7:14, his people, who are once again called by his name, can now seek his face and God will hear from heaven and heal their land. The abundance of population will be proof of this favor of God that now rests on his people. Then indeed, they and the nations will know that the Lord has rebuilt that which he destroyed and replanted that which he desolated (Ezek. 36:36). God's holiness will then have been displayed fully both in the judgment of the wicked and in the gracious salvation and transformation of the people called by his name.

Bridging Contexts

CEREMONIAL CLEANNESS AND uncleanness. The concept of ceremonial uncleanness is a distinctive feature of the Old Testament law. People and things were divided by nature into the categories of "clean" and "unclean," of "sacred" and "profane." Sheep, for example, were "clean" animals, which could be eaten, while camels were "unclean" and could not be eaten (Lev. 11:4).

These were not random divisions within the animal kingdom, nor were they categories motivated by hygienic considerations, a reflection of the relative safety of the meat of the animals concerned. Rather, the animals functioned as a means of holding up a mirror to society. Unclean animals formed the outer circle of the natural order. They were neither to be eaten nor sacrificed to God. Clean animals formed an intermediate category: All clean animals were fit to be eaten, but only some clean animals qualified for inclusion in the central circle, those that could be used for a "sacred" purpose by being sacrificed to God. Those that fit the criteria for this function had to be unblemished animals from a limited number of groups.

A similar ordering prevailed in the social realm and in the realm of sacred geography. On the outside of the circle were the nations, those who lived outside the Promised Land. They could observe God's great acts and act as witnesses of his mighty deeds. But unless they converted, they could not enter the inner circle of God's covenant people, Israel, and live permanently in the land. Even this inner group was subdivided, however, with a "sacred" minority who served as priests and had access to the inner areas of the tabernacle and temple. Membership of this group was limited to unblemished members of a particular subgroup (Levites who were descendants of Aaron). Only these people were qualified for the sacred purpose of approaching God. One of the responsibilities of the priests was to teach clearly to the people these distinctions between "clean" and "unclean" (Lev. 10:10–11; Ezek. 22:26; 44:23).

These were not entirely fixed categories, however. What was clean could become unclean, either temporarily or permanently. For example, a man could become unclean through a bodily discharge or through contact with a person so afflicted (Lev. 15:2–15). Anyone who thus came into contact with the realm of death was temporarily unfit for contact with the living God. Moreover, anyone who had incurred a certain kind of skin disease might become permanently unclean and be cut off from the covenant community (Lev. 13:45–46). Likewise, what was holy could become profane through inappropriate contact with the profane; and if the priests failed to be holy, they profaned the holy name of the Lord (21:6; 22:2).

What Israel had done through her idolatry and bloodshed was to move themselves as a nation from the category of "clean" to "unclean." The land had become defiled by their presence, just as a woman was defiled (temporarily) by her monthly flow of blood. They were therefore no longer able to inhabit the inner circle, the land of promise, from which they had necessarily been scattered (Ezek. 36:18–19). The punishment fit the crime: Having behaved like the unclean (the nations), they were now scattered among them.

But this was not—indeed, could not be—the final word. For the holiness of God's name was linked to his people, and therefore he would act to move them back from the outer circle to the inner circle. Physically, they would be regathered from among the nations. Spiritually, they would be purified with clean water to cleanse them from existing impurities and changed from

the inside out to prevent a recurrence of uncleanness. Then they would be fit to live in the presence of the Holy One and to commune with him.

In the New Testament, the old categories of "clean" and "unclean" are radically revised. This epochal change was revealed in a vision to Peter in Acts 10, when he was shown all kinds of unclean food that he was instructed to eat. But his initial refusal, itself an echo of Ezekiel's refusal to eat unclean food in Ezekiel 4, was rebuked by God with the words: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (Acts 10:15). A radical change had taken place in redemptive history with the death and resurrection of Christ and the pouring out of the Spirit on the church. At a stroke, the old barriers were broken down. The motivation for change was not that the dietary restrictions would form a barrier to the effective evangelization of Gentiles but that the old wall of separation between Jew and Gentile as God's people and outsiders had gone in Christ (Eph. 2:11–22). Now the nations could be included in the people of God, and the line between "clean" and "unclean" is determined not by ethnic origins but by faith in Jesus Christ.

It is important that we recognize the nature of this change, however. It is not that the line between clean and unclean, between holy and profane, has been abolished. Rather, it has moved. In Christ, men and women from all nations become "clean" and "holy." The goal of Exodus 19:6, the creation of a kingdom of priests and a holy people, is fulfilled in the church (Rev. 5:10). No longer are there any gradations of holiness within the holy people: All who are in Christ are sacred, and there is a genuine priesthood that belongs to all believers. For Christians every activity in life is sacred—from reading the Scriptures to emptying the garbage—for all is done to the glory of God. But all those outside of Christ are unclean and profane, no matter their genetic background or their religious fervor. Outside of Christ, their best and most self-denying endeavors are unfit for God's presence, suited only for the trash heap.

Concern for the name of God. In a similar fashion to the concept of ritual cleanliness, the concern for the "name" of God is likewise a distinctive concern of the Old Testament. The divine name Yahweh was revealed to Moses on Mount Horeb (Ex. 3:14), a decisive progress in the self-revelation of God. God's name was placed on the angel who went ahead of the Israelites into the Promised Land, which means that rebellion

against him was tantamount to rebellion against God himself (Ex. 23:21). God's name also appeared as a virtual hypostasis of the Lord himself, whether coming against his people in judgment (Isa. 30:27) or dwelling in their midst in blessing at the central place of worship (Deut. 12:5, 11). The Aaronic blessing was intended as a means of putting God's name on the Israelites, so that they might receive his blessing (Num. 6:27).

In the New Testament, concern for God's name remains a central category. The Lord's Prayer includes the petition: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name" (Matt. 6:9). The precise focus, however, has shifted. Now the name placed on God's people is the triune name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (28:19). There is no longer a central place of worship on which the divine name is placed and where the divine presence is experienced; instead, whenever two or three of his people gather in the name of Jesus, they experience his presence with them (18:20). God's children are all those who believe in the name of Jesus (John 1:12). Gentiles too are included in this people whom God has chosen for his name (Acts 15:14). By this act of salvation, accomplished through Jesus' death on the cross, the Father will glorify his name (John 12:28).

God's exclusive concern with his own name and glory may seem offensively self-absorbed to contemporary readers. We are used to beginning our theological reflection "from below" and celebrating the God who is "for us." But God is only for us because it brings glory to himself. Moreover, such self-absorption is as great a virtue in God as it is a flaw in human beings. For God to delight in his own perfections is entirely appropriate, since there is no one and nothing greater in which he can delight. To delight in anything less than himself would be idolatry, just as surely as it is idolatry for us as creatures to delight in anything less than our great Creator. Sanctifying his great name, exalting God above all things, is the only task fit for God himself and for humankind, whom he has created in his image.¹²

Contemporary Significance

LIFE CHANGES. The traditional sea shanty "What Shall We Do With the Drunken Sailor?" considers a number of methods of bringing about behavioral change in the inebriate. "Drag him in the longboat until he's

sober" is one possibility; another is, "Put him in the scuppers and hose him all over." One doubts, however, that the methods adopted will bring about lasting life-change in the person. Other, more serious, methods of attempting to bring about change in people's lives exist in the contemporary world. These include Alcoholics Anonymous, "twelve-step" programs for those with various addictions, Weight Watchers and other programs for those whose problem is with eating, and a plethora of counseling resources for behavioral difficulties. Many people spend hours of their time and countless dollars of resources in seeking effective, lasting change.

The motivation for seeking change on the part of the person concerned is frequently the perception that their life is in some way *dysfunctional*. Such people feel they are not living life to the full, but instead are engaging in lifestyle choices that result in a diminished quality of life. If only they could solve their behavioral problem or find and fix its underlying psychological root, their life will surely be fuller and more meaningful. Then they will be "cured."

In contrast to this essentially medical model of the human predicament, Ezekiel has presented the Lord's diagnosis of Israel's situation. She is not so much sick and in need of a cure, as sinful and in need of purification. Through her past history of sin, she has made herself totally unfit to inhabit God's land and to exist in his presence. Because of her sin, she is offensive to a holy God. In the language that the apostle Paul applies to all of us, she is "by nature [the] object of [God's] wrath" (Eph. 2:3). Her lifestyle change is necessary not so much because she is missing out on living life to the full, but because she has forfeited the right to life itself. God's judgment has descended on her, and she has been scattered among the nations.

This raises the question, "Is such radical change possible?" In contemporary life-change programs, this question is invariably answered in the affirmative: Because of the infinite power of the human spirit, you *can* kick that habit, lose those pounds, win friends and influence people—at least, so the brochures assure us. This humanistic optimism often carries over into the church. So we assure people, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life," as if that were the most natural and self-evident truth in the world. In consequence, it is not surprising to find that many people approach Christianity as if they were interviewing God for a job, checking out whether as a Deity he is up to the task of being "Lord of

their life." They are seeking to determine whether Christianity will "work for them," on the assumption that God will be only too pleased to welcome them should they decide in his favor.

The Bible, however, gives us no reason to be so automatically sanguine about the prospect of our acceptance by God. Ever since the fall of Adam and Eve, there has been no "of course" when it comes to the question of the future of the human race. We have collectively walked the tightrope of total destruction by God's wrath several times. That we have survived as a race is not because we somehow merited God's favor or because God's love is more powerful than his wrath and he could not bear to see such delightful creatures as us utterly exterminated. The *only* reason for the continued existence of human beings on this planet is God's commitment to his eternal plan sovereignly to save for himself a people.¹³

What is more, just as Israel was maintained alive by God's firm determination to glorify himself in and through the people he had chosen, so it is also for us who make up the church. There is no "of course" about our salvation. By nature, we are deservedly dead and have no prospect apart from God's wrath. It might be a more biblical approach if instead of starting with the love of God, we begin our presentation of the gospel where Paul does in Romans: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men" (Rom. 1:18). That there is another way, as Paul goes on to unfold in what follows, is an astonishing testimony to God's determination to finish what he started, for his own glory and not for ours. Our salvation is entirely by grace.

Purification and renovation. Because of God's determination to finish what he started, we can be sure not only that his people will be saved but also that they will be fully sanctified. Israel must be cleansed and made holy if she is to stand in his presence. So also the church, God's new covenant people, must be purified from their sins and perfected in righteousness. The people who are saved not *by* works are saved *through* God's work, *for* good works (Eph. 2:9–10).

This work of God in believers is a two-stage process, just as it is depicted in Ezekiel 36.¹⁴ First there is an initial work of *purification*, which corresponds to the outward sprinkling of water on the restored Israel (36:25). Then there is an ongoing work of internal *renovation*, which Ezekiel describes under the figure of receiving the new heart and new spirit

through the internal work of the divine Spirit (36:26–27). These two stages are both necessary to being a Christian, and this passage may well be the one that lies behind Jesus' statement to Nicodemus, "No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit" (John 3:5).¹⁵

(1) God's initial work involves the purification of our sins. In this work, we are the passive recipients of his action in washing away our sins, applying to us the merits of Jesus' work on the cross (Eph. 5:26). It is the necessity of this cleansing regeneration to which baptism points: When we are baptized, whether as adults or children, we testify to the need we all have for Jesus Christ, whose cleansing blood is symbolized in the water. Baptism points to the need for a change that can only come from the outside, for it can only be done by someone else. It is not so much a testimony of my decision for Jesus as an act of wondering faith that Jesus has decided for me.

Baptism is an act of faith in God's promises. When Abraham circumcised his children, he knew it was a circumcision of the heart that counted, not an external ceremony. This is the logic behind the baptism of the children of believers in Reformed and Presbyterian churches. When we baptize our children, we know that a baptism of the heart, a new birth through the Holy Spirit, is necessary. Simply applying water to the outside will not save. But in baptism we lay hold by faith of the goodness of God and claim for our children the promise of the Holy Spirit.

What grounds do any of us have as Christians for hoping that our children will grow up to believe the same things that we do? Perhaps some would say, "Well, I send my little Joshua to church; I read the Bible with him; I set him an example in Christian living." Now all of those things are good, but the only thing you can do for your child by yourself is make your child religious. Only God can give your child the new heart he or she requires. "Well, of course, he'll do that," you reply. But why should there be any "of course" about it? The only thing we pass on to our children as "a matter of course" is a sinful nature and a flawed example.

We can be grateful, however, that God has revealed himself as a covenant God, who deals faithfully with us as families as well as individuals (Gen. 17:7). This self-commitment is not simply a blessing for the old covenant order. As Peter told his hearers on the first day of Pentecost: "The promise [of the Holy Spirit] is for you and your children and for all who are far off"

(Acts 2:39). That is what people in the Reformed tradition proclaim joyfully to the world when they baptize little ones—that they too have a promise that they can look to God in repentance and faith and receive the promised Holy Spirit. They are acknowledging to themselves and their children that they cannot save themselves—but also that God can, and will, if they look to him in repentance and faith. He will do so, because he is a covenant-keeping God, who does not change and who brings about his determined purpose to save and sanctify a people for himself.¹⁶

(2) Thus, God's "wonderful plan" for our lives is not limited to taking us to heaven; it also includes bringing heaven into us, remaking us into a holy people. He is not content merely to wash his people of their past sins and to impute to them the righteousness of Jesus Christ, he also wills to work a perfect holiness in them. This is the second stage of God's great work in redeemed humanity: renovation. God's determinate plan is that we be perfect as he is perfect (Matt. 5:48), that when Jesus Christ returns, we be completely purified from all sin (1 John 3:2–6). To be sure, that purpose is not yet a present reality. Everyone living in this world does, in fact, still sin (1 John 1:8). But the Spirit has been poured out into our hearts, in a measure that Old Testament saints could only dream about, in order that the process might begin in us here and now in full assurance that on that day it will be completed.

To be sure, Old Testament saints also experienced the renewing work of the Spirit of God (Ps. 51:10–11).¹⁷ But in their experience the work was always partial, always provisional. Now that Christ has died and risen, the Spirit of God has been given to us in full measure, so that by him we might put to death the misdeeds of the body (Rom. 8:13). At present, we may experience only the firstfruits of the Spirit's work, and we await with eagerness the fullness of redemption (8:23). But just as we look forward to the day when we will be done with sin and long for its coming, so also that promise of God provides the incentive to holy living here and now (1 John 3:3).

A feeling of shame. Finally, God's "wonderful plan" for our lives does not exclude the possibility of shame over past sins. Renewed Israel was to "be ashamed and disgraced" over their conduct, even to the point of self-loathing for their "sins and detestable practices" (Ezek. 36:31–32). Modern

people may view such self-loathing as psychologically unhealthy, urging the foundational importance of a high self-esteem.¹⁸

The Bible takes a different view of our position, however. As we grow in our appreciation of the gospel, we do not view ourselves in a better and better light. Rather, with Paul, we understand the true offensiveness of our sin, so that we come to view ourselves as the worst of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). We grow to understand that, by nature, we are far worse than we ever could have imagined, that the wrath of God against my personal sin is fully justified, and that even in my best moments, in my most righteous acts, I deserve nothing other than utter damnation. My heart is indeed deceitful above all things and beyond cure (Jer. 17:9). As a Christian, the first thing I need to know, as the Heidelberg Catechism reminds us, is how great are my sin and misery. That knowledge should induce an appropriate level of sorrow and shame over my sin.

However, as Paul says in a different context, we should not grieve as those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13). Though we are indeed far worse than we could have imagined, the gospel reminds us also that in Christ we are far more loved than we could have imagined. It reminds us that though we are and remain sinners all our days on earth, we are at the same time as Christians *justified* sinners, who will one day certainly be *glorified* sinners, perfect in holiness. This is certain because it rests on God's unchanging and eternal decree, not on my fallible and failing efforts. And if God is for us, though the present struggle may be hard and long, the eternal outcome is secure.

Ezekiel 37:1-14

THE HAND OF THE LORD was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

I said, "O Sovereign LORD, you alone know."

⁴Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! ⁵This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.'"

⁷So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

⁹Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.' " ¹⁰So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

¹¹Then he said to me: "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' ¹²Therefore prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O my people, I am going

to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.'"

Original Meaning

FROM AN ORACLE depicting flourishing garden-cities filled with vibrantly alive people (36:33–38), the prophet is transported into the darkness of the valley of the shadow of death in chapter 37. This is not the first time that the Spirit has led him out into "a valley" (37:1); this location also provided the backdrop for the prophet's vision of God's glory in 3:22. However, this time the sight that greets him is a scene of total desolation: The valley is full of bones, bones that are many in number and very dry in nature (37:2). But even "Death Valley" must be swallowed up in victory as Ezekiel sees the Lord fulfill in visionary form the promise of 36:27 to put his vivifying Spirit within his people.

The statement that "the hand of the LORD was upon me" (v. 1) links this vision together with the prophet's other visions (1:3; 3:14; 8:1; 40:1), inviting us to view this scene in their light. In the light of 3:22–23, it becomes clear that the valley was not just a random geographical location but a valley in exile. Yet, viewing the vision in the light of chapters 40–48 suggests the significance of the fact that it is a *valley*: The valley in exile forms the ultimate contrast to the "very high mountain" within the land of Israel (40:2). It is the place of death, from which Israel must be delivered before they can be brought into the land of life. This contrast is underlined by the verbs of motion by which the prophet is transported: He is "brought out" (Hiphil of $y\bar{a}s\bar{a}$) to the valley of death in 37:1 but "brought in" (Hiphil of $b\hat{o}$) to the land of life in 40:2.

First the prophet is confronted with a scene of total death. He is "led . . . back and forth" over the piles of bones (37:2); there must be no question of his having missed some flicker of life among the bones through having

made merely a superficial inspection. Ezekiel's examination is thorough, his conclusions irrefutable: The situation is inimical to life. The valley is filled not merely with slain corpses, but with skeletal remains, and dry skeletal remains at that.

The Lord's question to the prophet, "Son of man, can these bones live?" (Ezek. 37:3a), seems redundant. Certainly, by the power of God corpses have been resuscitated before this in Israel, but only shortly after death, before decomposition occurred (1 Kings 17:17–24; 2 Kings 4:18–37; 13:21). It seems as if the prophet's earlier question, "Will you completely destroy the remnant of Israel?" (Ezek. 11:13), has now been answered in the affirmative. God's people have been utterly destroyed for their sin. The covenant curses have been executed and the corpses of the slain left unburied. No life remains in the bones. End of story.

Recognizing the sovereign power of God, however, the prophet is unwilling to give a negative answer. Rather, he turns the question back to God: "O Sovereign LORD, you alone know" (37:3b). In view of the overwhelming outpouring of God's wrath, he cannot answer, "Of course, Lord." Since the destruction of Jerusalem, which was the just judgment on her sins, there can be no "of course." God certainly has the power to bring the dry bones back to life; the question remains as to whether it is his will to do so. That question is swiftly answered in the affirmative: God wills that the dry bones shall indeed live.

The second question to be answered is then, "How shall these bones live?" The means by which that regeneration is brought about is through an infusion of the Spirit $(r\hat{u}a\dot{h})$ in response to the prophetic word. Thus, Ezekiel is told to prophesy to the bones and require them to listen to the word of the Lord; in response, the Lord will make breath $(r\hat{u}a\dot{h})$ enter them and bring them back to life, not as ghostly skeletons but as living flesh (37:5–6). Then the bones will know God's lordship.

The prophet obediently speaks the word and sees the power of God instantly unleashed. While he is prophesying, the bones come together and are clothed in flesh and skin—but still without life; there was no breath $(r\hat{u}ah)$ in them. It seems as if God's word has failed, as if the bones are after all too dry even for God. But almost before the thought has been framed, it is answered by a second command to prophesy. This time he is to prophesy to the wind $(r\hat{u}ah)$, which is invoked to come from afar, bringing life-giving

breath to the people. Like the creation of the first 'ādām in Genesis 2, which was a two-stage process involving first his formation and then his filling with the breath of life, so the re-creation of this mighty army is a two-stage process of forming and filling. This underlines the difficulty of the recreation process and the central role of the Spirit in bringing new life to the restored people.⁴

But if the Spirit gives the power through which regeneration takes place, Ezekiel himself is the channel through whom that power is brought to bear. He himself personally experienced a similar infusion of the Spirit at the outset of his ministry. Twice, confronted with the awesome majesty of God, he was reduced to prostration (Ezek. 1:28; 3:23); each time the Spirit entered $(b\hat{o})$ him, raising him to his feet (2:2; 3:24). This is exactly what happens to the dry bones after they have been re-formed into bodies: The Spirit enters $(b\hat{o})$ them, raising them to their feet (37:10). What had first happened in his own life now happens to the renewed Israel through the means of the powerful prophetic word.

Another parallel with the earlier visions helps to make the power of the word even clearer. In Ezekiel 11, the prophet was shown a scene and commanded to prophesy to those involved. On that occasion, it was a word of judgment against the twenty-five men at the east gate of the temple (11:4). In both cases, while Ezekiel "was prophesying" (11:13; 37:7), the words had immediate effect, demonstrated in the death of Pelatiah (11:13) and the coming together of the bones (37:7). Just as the death of Pelatiah served as a graphic demonstration of the certainty of the coming judgment on Jerusalem, so also here the re-creation and restoration of the bones serves as a guarantee of what it symbolizes, the ultimate restoration of Israel as a nation.⁵

The oracle that follows the vision (37:11–14) merely serves to make explicit what the vision has already recounted. The dry bones are the whole house of Israel, who have come to recognize the seriousness of their situation. They are helpless and hopeless, cut off from God's life-giving presence (37:11). Without in the least contradicting this self-perception that their present situation is hopeless—indeed, reinforcing the accurateness of the idea—the Lord still affirms that there is nonetheless hope for the future.

There is a sure and certain future based not on what Israel can do but on God's determination to save his people. Twice, the Lord addresses them as

"my people" (37:12–13). Though they are indeed dead, God can and will tear open their graves (shifting the metaphor slightly) and bring them up from the dead, giving them life through his Spirit and resettling them in their land (37:14). The promises of a new spirit and a return to the land made in Ezekiel 36:27–36 will indeed be fulfilled. Then they will know that the Lord not only speaks but acts, thus disproving the proverb of the skeptic, quoted in 12:22: "The days go by and every vision comes to nothing." Ezekiel's visions will come about, and the people will be restored to their land and revitalized, through the internal work of God's Spirit.

Bridging Contexts

FAMILIARITY LEADS TO misinterpretation. Of all of the prophecies of Ezekiel, this section is perhaps the most familiar to the average reader. This is not necessarily an advantage, however, because it means that common misconceptions may first have to be cleared away before the constructive work can be done.

At first sight, for example, Ezekiel 37 seems to be a proof text for the resurrection of the body, as many of the early church fathers (and early rabbinic interpreters) understood it to be. However, what the prophet is depicting is certainly not an expected universal resurrection. Otherwise, his answer to the question "Can these bones live?" would have been, "Most certainly," or, in similar vein to Martha's response to Jesus, "I know [they] will rise again in the resurrection at the last day" (John 11:24). The question posed by God to the prophet is not a universal philosophical one, "Will bones in general be resurrected?" In the context, it is the intensely particular question, "Will *these* bones live?"

The fact that this passage has been so widely misunderstood by interpreters from such a wide range of backgrounds raises a further point about the nature of visions. Visions, like parables, tend to be open-ended, full of imagery that is capable of diverse interpretations. The precision of logically constructed syllogisms is traded for the affective power of symbols. Some visions are deliberately open-ended, especially those dealing with the future. To avoid such misunderstanding, therefore, it is especially important to read visions within their context. If the vision itself

is removed from the context of the biblical book in which it stands, as if it were a timeless statement of universal truths, misunderstanding is likely.

In a similar way, a single still photograph taken from a film might be open to many different interpretations, although, seen within the flow of the movie, its meaning may be univocal. In the case of Ezekiel 37, the context is twofold. The narrower context is the interpretation of the vision given by the Lord himself in 37:11–14. The broader context is the place of the vision within the book itself, as part of the message of restoration to a people who have experienced a full outpouring of the wrath of God.

Exactly what the Old Testament writers understood about life after death in general is still a much-debated topic. Certainly, there was no widespread expectation of bodily resurrection of the kind that appears in the New Testament. The shadowy underground land of Sheol was feared as a place of continued existence, though it can hardly be called life, from which the righteous hoped to be delivered by the Lord (Ps. 49:14–15). The righteous are never actually said to go there, however; though they may fear it as a possibility, it is ultimately the destination of those without God. But in general the Old Testament is vague about the future of the righteous.

In principle, the Old Testament is not opposed to the idea of a resurrection. Indeed, Jesus himself argued for the idea of resurrection from the fundamental Old Testament credo that the God who is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the God of the living, not of the dead (Matt. 22:32). But the focus of the Old Testament is more centrally on the Lord's power over death, whether by rescuing the saints from its clutches (Ps. 18:4–19) or by the miraculous resuscitation of the dead (1 Kings 17:17–24; 2 Kings 4:31–37; 13:20–21). The resurrection (or, more precisely, resuscitation) of the bones in Ezekiel 37 has much more in common with the latter incidents from the ministry of Elijah and Elisha than it does with later ideas of a general resurrection of the dead on the last day.⁸

Neither is there a simple line of connection between this passage and the eschatological outpouring of the Spirit in the last days, predicted in Joel 2:28–29 and fulfilled on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. *That* outpouring of the Spirit resulted in an extension of the gift of prophecy to all, as Moses had longed to see in Numbers 11:29. The infusion of the Spirit in Ezekiel results instead in renewed life and new power for right living, which is itself a promised prerequisite for life in the land (Ezek. 36:27–28).

Re-creating Israel. In summary, then, this passage is about the divine work of re-creating Israel through the prophetic word and Spirit. Though God's people have been justly judged and handed over into the realm of death for their sins, so that, humanly speaking, there is now no hope for them, yet God can bring life out of death. Because of his wrath, their death is real; because of his grace and his sovereign will to have a people of his own, however, their future prospect of life may be equally real. It is this that the prophet is called to proclaim to them. What he has first experienced himself he now announces to others: life in the Spirit through the power of God. The new creation that was begun in him will assuredly be brought to fulfillment by God.

What precisely does re-creating Israel mean, however? Does it directly anticipate the formation of the present political state of Israel, as some have supposed? To argue in this way is to miss the spiritual significance of the prophecy. For what is in view here, as the connections back to Ezek. 36:24–38 make clear, is something more than political autonomy for the descendants of Abraham. It is nothing short of the fulfillment of all Old Testament anticipations of eschatological fullness, all of which are fulfilled in Christ. It is in him that the new Spirit-filled Israel of God takes shape, an identity that is no longer governed by ethnic origins and circumcision, as the old Israel was, but rather by faith in the cross of Christ (Gal. 6:12–16).

Contemporary Significance

Is "LIFE AFTER death" possible? What happens when you die? This topic has ignited a great deal of interest in recent years, especially through the publication of several books recounting "near-death" experiences, in which a person felt as if he or she had died briefly and then returned to tell the tale.

What Israel faced, however, was not a "near-death" experience, but a "total-death" experience. It was not simply that their heart had stopped beating for a few moments and their brain waves had ceased; they had died and decomposed; their flesh had disintegrated, leaving only bones behind; and then those bones themselves had been left out in the sun to bleach. They were as dead as it was possible to be—and that while physically still alive, for they themselves said, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is

gone; we are cut off" (Ezek. 37:11). They knew themselves to be dead while they lived, for they were cut off from the life-giving presence of the living God and therefore without hope.

That is a spiritual condition that by nature we all share. Paul reminds the Ephesians, and along with them all of us, "You were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air" (Eph. 2:1–2). By nature, we are all cut off from God's life-giving presence. Subjectively, we may or may not be aware of that fact. We may feel that we are on top of the world and that life couldn't possibly be better, or we may despair of making any sense of the world in which we live. Objectively, however, we are equally dead, no matter how we feel.

Can such dead people live? Is it possible, not merely theoretically but actually, for people like us to be resuscitated and brought back to life toward God? That question cannot simply be answered, "Of course!" as if it were a trivial matter. Because of our sin we are under God's wrath, so the question is not merely "Can God in general raise dead people to life?" but rather "Will he raise rebels like us to life?" Thanks be to God, the answer for us is positive, as it was for Israel. Thus Paul tells the Colossians, "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ" (Col. 2:13). In Christ, there is life for the spiritually dead.

How, though, is this new life received? It is received through union with Christ. In the preceding verse (Col. 2:12), Paul talks about how as Christians we have been buried with Christ in baptism and raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. In other words, it is as we share an experience that Christ first experienced for us that we are brought from death to life. For Ezekiel, what happened to the bones had first happened to him. So it is with us: What God does for the Christian, he has first of all done for Jesus.

Jesus took on himself our death. The death that he died on the cross was no mere accident, nor even a means of demonstrating graphically the extent of his love for humanity. There on the cross, he took on himself the sins of his people and was cut off for them. The Lord of life was laid in the tomb; the body of the one who created the universe was laid alongside the bones of those whom he had made. Why? It is because God's wrath against sin

demanded that a just penalty be paid. God could not simply wave a magic wand and make sin disappear. Sin had to be paid for. In order to accomplish that, Jesus was, as it were, laid among the dry bones of the valley for my sake. So now my baptism is a burial with him in that death, an identification with his death in my place.

But just as the dry bones in Ezekiel did not remain dead, so also Christ did not remain in the tomb! He burst forth with resurrection power, raised from the dead by God! Just as surely, if we have been truly buried with him in baptism, receiving the reality as well as the sign, we also are made alive in Christ. Our sins are forgiven; the hold of the law over us is broken, nailed to the cross (Col. 2:14). We are not dry bones any longer, but living, breathing, Spirit-infused children of God (Rom. 8:16). What Ezekiel saw in visionary form has now become a reality!

The consequences of life after death. What are the consequences of this fact? (1) There is no reason for Christians to despair. Once again, subjectively we may or may not be aware of that fact. We may feel inside every bit as despairing as Ezekiel's hearers of making sense of our circumstances. Yet that inner confusion does not shake the objective fact to which Scripture points us: If we have died with Christ, we will certainly live with him (Rom. 6:8). To be sure, we do not yet see the full implications of this identification with our resurrected Lord. We still wait for the redemption of our bodies from this sin-tarnished world, where things fall apart and people become sick and die. We cry out in pain because of the tragedies we experience. Yet in the midst of our pain we are called to wait with confident hope (Rom. 8:23–24).

The objective fact of Christ's resurrection is the source of our confidence. Indeed, the importance of the physical resurrection of Christ is not simply that it proves the survival of the soul in general, or that life goes on in some sense beyond the grave. Otherwise, the resurrection of Christ would have no more significance than other resurrections recorded in Scripture, such as that of Lazarus. On the contrary, the New Testament teaching is that the resurrection of Christ is something entirely new, something of pivotal importance for our faith as Christians (1 Cor. 15:12). C. S. Lewis puts it like this:

The New Testament writers speak as if Christ's achievement in rising from the dead was the first event of its kind in the whole history of the universe. He is the "first fruits," the "pioneer of life." He has forced open a door that has been locked since the death of the first man. He has met, fought and beaten the King of Death. Everything is different because He has done so. This is the beginning of the New Creation: a new chapter in cosmic history has opened.

Because Christ has been raised physically and gloriously to life, so also we will be raised physically and gloriously to life; the firstfruits provide the assurance of the full harvest (1 Cor. 15:20–23). Christian hope is therefore focused concretely on Christ in us, the hope of glory (Col. 1:27). Our sure and certain hope is that God's energy is at work in us to present us perfect in Christ (Col. 1:28). Even now we are indwelt by the Spirit of Christ who is at work in us, changing us into what we ought to be (Rom. 8:11).

(2) Since we are indwelt by the Spirit, we should walk according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:4, 12). Ezekiel was filled with the Spirit in Ezekiel 2–3 to equip him for his task; likewise, when the resuscitated bones came together, they became an army, not a debating club or a beach party. They were raised for a purpose. In a similar way, we as Christians have been regenerated and Spirit-filled in order that we too may serve, equipped by the gifts of the Spirit and dressed in the armor of God so that we may do his bidding in the world. We were re-created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Eph. 2:10). In the appropriately martial imagery of Charles Wesley's hymn, our commission is as follows:

Soldiers of Christ, arise and put your armor on, Strong in the strength which God supplies, through his eternal Son.

Strong in the Lord of Hosts, and in his mighty power, Who in the strength of Jesus trusts is more than conqueror. Stand, then, in his great might, with all his strength endued;

And take to arm you for the fight, the panoply of God.
That, having all things done and all your conflicts past,
Ye may o'ercome through Christ alone and stand complete
at last.

Leave no unguarded place, no weakness of the soul; Take every virtue, every grace and fortify the whole. From strength to strength go on; wrestle and fight and pray;

Tread all the powers of darkness down and win the well-fought day.

Ezekiel 37:15-28

THE WORD OF THE LORD came to me: ¹⁶ Son of man, take a stick of wood and write on it, 'Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him.' Then take another stick of wood, and write on it, 'Ephraim's stick, belonging to Joseph and all the house of Israel associated with him.' ¹⁷ Join them together into one stick so that they will become one in your hand.

¹⁸"When your countrymen ask you, 'Won't you tell us what you mean by this?' 19 say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am going to take the stick of Joseph—which is in Ephraim's hand—and of the Israelite tribes associated with him, and join it to Judah's stick, making them a single stick of wood, and they will become one in my hand.' ²⁰Hold before their eyes the sticks you have written on ²¹ and say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. ²²I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. There will be one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms. ²³They will no longer defile themselves with their idols and vile images or with any of their offenses, for I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them. They will be my people, and I will be their God.

²⁴" 'My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees. ²⁵They will live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land

where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children will live there forever, and David my servant will be their prince forever. ²⁶I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. ²⁷My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. ²⁸Then the nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever.' "

Original Meaning

THIS PASSAGE CONTAINS a sign-act and a related oracle concerning the future reunification of God's people. It acts as a hinge, both summing up the oracles of hope in chapters 34–37 and looking forward to the establishment of the new sanctuary (chs. 40–48) after the final convulsion of evil in chapters 38–39.

The sign-act involves the prophet's taking two sticks, each of which he is to inscribe with a name (37:16). One is to be designated "Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him" (i.e., the southern kingdom), while the other is to bear the message, "Ephraim's stick, belonging to Joseph and all the house of Israel associated with him" (i.e., the northern kingdom). Strictly speaking, the two rivals for first place among Jacob's sons are Judah and Joseph; hence the proper designation of the sticks as "Belonging to Judah/belonging to Joseph." Historically, however, the rivalry had become essentially a struggle between (the tribes of) Judah and Ephraim, who was Joseph's younger son and the dominant tribe in the northern part of Israel. For that reason, after the schism at the time of Rehoboam, the northern kingdom based in Samaria is frequently referred to as "Ephraim." This historical reality is reflected in the description of the second stick as "Ephraim's stick." Ezekiel is then instructed to join the sticks together in his hand so that they become one stick (37:17).

The writing on the sticks makes the symbolism of the act entirely transparent. Clearly, the reunification of northern and southern kingdoms is

anticipated. The sticks ('ēṣ') inscribed with names of tribes recall the incident of Numbers 17:6–10, where the staffs (maṭṭeh) of the tribal princes are placed before the Lord and Aaron's staff is chosen. Here, however, far from choosing one from the many, the two sticks (scepters?)² will be merged into a single, united entity. Not only will the events of recent history be reversed, as has been the focus of Ezekiel 34–37 so far; in addition, the events of much earlier history will be undone. The divided kingdom will once again be undivided. The key word in this section is the word "one" ('eḥād), which occurs ten times.³

Because the action itself is so transparent, the expected question from the audience, "Won't you tell us what you mean by this?" (37:18), is not a request for illumination about the import of the various symbols. Rather, it is a question about the deeper significance of the sign. The Lord's reply, therefore, merely reiterates the sign without further explication, while adding the emphasis that "I" will accomplish all this.⁴ The solution to Israel's lengthy history of internal division is not to be found in the appointment of a binational committee to develop a "peace process" but in the divine act of reuniting his people.

What is more, the divinely effected reunion will address the issues raised by the original schism. Just as the division was caused by a failure in the area of servant leadership, with Rehoboam unwilling to serve the people as the older counselors advised (1 Kings 12:7), so also the reunion will be effected by the Lord's providing a single servant-leader, "my servant David" (Ezek. 37:24). Just as the division resulted in the setting up of separate sanctuaries (1 Kings 12:25–33), so also the reunion will result in a return to a single, divinely approved sanctuary in their midst (Ezek. 37:26). There will be no glossing over the differences; the reunion will be established on the basis of a fundamental new spiritual unity, effected by God in the hearts of his people. The Lord's hand is the place where the sticks are rejoined.

Unlike chapter 34, then, the mention of "my servant David" focuses not so much on the nature of the leader as on his significance as the foundation of unity. Just as David had earlier welded the disparate tribes into a united kingdom, so this new David will bring about renewed unity: one kingdom under one king (37:22). He will rule over a renewed people, who will no longer defile themselves with their idols and images, whether in the defiled

Jerusalem temple (Ezek. 8) or in the dual temples that Jeroboam set up in Bethel and Dan (1 Kings 12:28–33). These temples, which the biblical writers viewed as idolatrous from the outset, will disappear altogether. The nation will be purified and cleansed by God, thus allowing for a restoration of the covenant relationship between God and his people (Ezek. 37:23) and the blessings that flow from such a relationship (37:25). What is more, those blessings will be enduring, to "their children and their children's children . . . forever" (37:25). The covenant of peace will be "an everlasting covenant"; the sanctuary will be restored to their midst "forever" (37:26).

Because the work of purification and reunification is the Lord's, so also the glory will be his. Just as the destruction of the temple and the scattering of the people led to the Lord's name being profaned among the nations, so also the permanent restoration of the sanctuary to Israel's midst will result in the nations' recognizing that the Lord has endowed his people with a new level of holiness (37:28). The significance of the temple's restoration as crowning blessing, then, is this: It is objective evidence of the successful completion of the Lord's purposes to make for himself a holy people, a purpose announced already in 36:27 as the expected result of the outpouring of the Lord's Spirit. The enduring existence of the temple is a marker of that transforming work, for the sanctuary can only exist securely forever in the midst of a thoroughly sanctified community.

This chapter (and with it the section comprising chs. 34–37) closes with the prospect of renewed Israel's living at peace within their own land (37:26). This is the necessary precondition for the final onslaught of the forces of evil in chapters 38–39, in which God will demonstrate his power and commitment to his people by decisively rescuing them from their enemies. However, it is also the necessary prerequisite for the temple building plan of chapters 40–48.

In Deuteronomy 12:10, the Lord promised to give rest (Hiphil of nwh) to his people from their enemies all around them in the land, after which it would be time to build the central sanctuary. In accordance with that command, "after the LORD had given [David] rest" (Hiphil of nwh, 2 Sam. 7:1), he started to think about building a temple for the Lord in Jerusalem. Similarly, once the new, united Israel has been settled (Hiphil of nwh) in the land (Ezek. 37:14) and is at peace, then the nation's thoughts will naturally turn to temple building. Thus the promise of the Lord's sanctuary in the

midst of his settled people is a fitting capstone to the prophecies of restoration. Though her enemies will once more descend on her (chs. 38–39), it is so that they may be defeated by the Lord, who will then establish his final temple (chs. 40–48).

Bridging Contexts

THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE of the temple. The temple is not a central category in contemporary Christian thinking. Where we do think of the Old Testament temple, we tend to think of it as simply the forerunner of the modern church building. Its broader political, social, and theological significance is largely lost on us.

In the ancient Near East, however, the state of a society's temples was considered a measure of its health and wealth and an indication of the favor of its gods. When a king was strong and prosperous, "blessed" by his god, that fact would often be publicly demonstrated through an ambitious program of public building works, of which a temple was a prime example. The building program itself could act as a focus of national unity and a sign of divine approval. In this context, a restoration of a people and of their monarchy without the visible symbol of divine presence provided by the temple would have been unthinkable.

In a similar way, the White House, the Capitol, and the other buildings in Washington, D.C., have a significance for Americans that goes far beyond their mere function as the seat of government. In a real sense, the buildings represent America, and to let them crumble would be unthinkable, even if other equivalent buildings had been erected to carry out their practical function. Thus, when the original presidential palace was destroyed in the War of 1812, it was a matter of national pride to replace it with a bigger and better building as soon as possible.

But there is more than one symbol of God's presence with his people in the Old Testament. The patriarchs experienced his presence in various ways, all of which were occasional rather than permanent. God's permanent dwelling in the midst of his people was not established until Mount Sinai, where Moses received the instructions for the tabernacle (Ex. 25–40). This dwelling was a mobile tent, appropriate for the people's condition as wanderers in the desert and for the early years of conquering the Promised

Land. The temple that Solomon constructed at God's command was different. It was not merely the tabernacle on a larger scale, it was a glorious building, exuding permanence and stability—the suitable symbol for God's people at rest in God's land (1 Kings 6).

Ezekiel's vision of God's presence in the midst of his people is different again: It revolves around the establishment of a sanctuary ($miqd\bar{a}\dot{s}$), a place where they experience and respect God's holiness. It is the symbol of a holy God living in the midst of a holy people. This theme will emerge more clearly in the detailed description of the temple in Ezekiel 40–48, but it is adumbrated already in 37:28, where it is announced that the nations will come to recognize that the Lord sanctifies ($m^eqadd\bar{e}\dot{s}$) Israel when his sanctuary ($miqd\bar{a}\dot{s}$) is among them forever.

The idea of the holy. This connection between the "sanctuary" and "sanctity" or "holiness" has been largely lost today. It was strongly present in medieval and pre-Reformation cathedrals and churches, which were normally divided into three parts. There was the nave, which was accessible to everybody; the chancel, which was only accessible to priest and choir; and the sanctuary, which housed the altar, where only the priest entered.8 This medieval layout directly reflects the design of the Old Testament temple.

Reformation churches, which rightly emphasized the priesthood—and thus sanctity—of all believers, did away with these distinctions. They recognized that, as we saw in our discussion of Ezekiel 36, the old division of sacred and profane no longer runs through God's people, separating sacred priest from secular congregation, but rather now divides a people who are all holy in Christ from a profane world. The church building was assigned its proper new covenant role as the meeting house of the saints, not the house of God. In place of the central (but remote) altar, the building was redesigned to gather the people around the pulpit and communion table, reflecting the vision of God's people assembled to receive his Word rightly preached and the sacraments duly administered.9

The danger of this arrangement, however, is that we lose the necessary sense of holiness when we gather as God's people. As we will see in our study of Ezekiel 40–48, holiness is one of the dominating principles of the new temple. Certainly, in revising the architecture of their churches, nobody intended to lose the idea of holiness. The intention of the Reformers was

rather to assert the holiness of all of life. In practice, however, we have all too often profaned all of life instead, leveling everything down rather than up.

Thus we may call the room in which we meet the "sanctuary," yet there is no sense of awe when we gather together as the church, no sense that it is the almighty and holy God himself with whom we are meeting. As a result, our individual lives are often similarly devoid of contact with the Holy One. Because we do not recognize the meeting together of the saints as a "sanctuary" in the biblical sense, we do not live the lives of sanctity that we ought.

Contemporary Significance

JESUS AS OUR TEMPLE. Church unity has become, in some quarters, the modern equivalent of the Holy Grail. It is the revered object of earnest searching and eager desire. There is good reason for this enthusiasm among Christians. Jesus himself prayed for his postapostolic followers to be one, just as he and the Father are one. His desire was that we might be brought to complete unity so that the world may know that the Father sent the Son (John 17:21–23). Though in the present we live in a world where Christians are fragmented and separated from one another, on the basis of the Scriptures we should be repeatedly saying to ourselves and to others: "This is not how the church ought to be." But it is not enough to be in favor of unity in the abstract; we must also be clear about the basis for this unity. In what is the unity of God's people to be grounded? Ezekiel 37 gives us the key answers.

Ezekiel's sign pointing to the reunification of God's people was grounded in the sovereign act of God's establishing one king over his people and one temple at the center of their worship. So also our desired unity as Christians, if it is to be genuine, must be grounded not in ecumenical study commissions and interchurch potluck dinners, but in Jesus Christ, who fulfills both aspects of Ezekiel 37 as our true temple and our true king. True Christian unity does not flow from the top down, with high-level ecclesiastical committees and denominational leaders showing the way, nor does it flow from the bottom up, coming by means of grass-roots initiatives by individual church members. Rather, it flows from the center out: It

comes from Christ-centered people discovering that they are, in fact, servants of a common Lord and King.

Christ himself is our true temple because he accomplished in himself everything to which the tabernacle and temple of the Old Testament pointed. When the Word became flesh, he "made his dwelling [lit., tabernacled] among us" (John 1:14), manifesting God's glory in our midst, just as the Mosaic tabernacle was the place where God's glory was manifested in the desert (Ex. 40:34). In him, God's glorious presence is experienced in the midst of his people. Moreover, to act against his person is to do nothing less than to assault God's temple. That is why, referring to his own body in John 2:19, Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

Because Jesus is our temple, he himself is what unites his people together in worship. When Jesus met with the woman of Samaria, he prophesied an end to the divisions between Jews and Samaritans founded on their separate temples: "A time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain [at the Samaritan temple located on Mount Gerizim] nor in Jerusalem [at the temple on Mount Zion] . . . [but] in spirit and in truth" (John 4:21–24). This marks a radical change in the old order of things, which anticipated the nations' coming to worship God at Mount Zion. With the coming of Christ, the old division between Jew and Samaritan in worship is broken down, not by Samaritans coming to the temple in Jerusalem but by Jew and Samaritan alike being incorporated into Christ himself, as the final temple.

Likewise, Christ has broken down the old wall between Jews and Gentiles through his death on the cross, building both together into a new, holy temple to the Lord (Eph. 2:14–22)." There is but one temple of God in this age, the church, the body of Jesus Christ, in which Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles are all brought together as one. As Galatians 3:28 puts it: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

True unity in the church. It is therefore necessarily a contradiction in terms when the church is divided on racial or ethnic lines. Churches and denominations ought not to be "homogeneous units," where Christians choose to meet together with others exactly like them. Rather, each church should strive to be a heterogeneous mixture of those for whom Christ died,

an entity that transcends racial, ethnic, cultural, and class barriers, giving expression as a worshiping community to the unity that is ours in our common adoption into God's family. As J. K. S. Reid puts it:

The church is not an association or corporation of likeminded individuals; and its unity does not have only such strength as their likemindedness possesses and so can confer. On the contrary, its unity rests upon what Christ has done and is thus complete and inviolate.¹²

Jesus as our king. Our unity as God's people is also rooted in the kingship of Christ. Our fundamental, most basic Christian confession is "Jesus is Lord" (Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3). It is because Jesus is the chief cornerstone that the entire building holds together (Eph. 2:20). The church is only one flock, because we are all under the one Shepherd (John 10:16). Jesus Christ is the true and only Head of the church, the One from whom all authority flows. The ascended Lord is the One who provides pastors and teachers for his church, so that we may all "reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God" (Eph. 4:13).

The division of Israel in Ezekiel's day was not between two equally valid opinions, between allegiance to two equally legitimate kings. There was no doubt in the minds of the biblical writers that the line of David was the legitimate line, so that unity could only come in the person of that line. The northern kingdom had to surrender their erroneous views for true peace to be established. In the same way, the age-old dispute between the Samaritans and Jews of Jesus' day was not a moot issue. There was a right answer to the theological issue as to where one should worship: Mount Gerizim or Jerusalem. The Jews had historically been right (John 4:22). Unity would come not through Jews and Samaritans forging a balanced compromise, representing the middle ground between them. Rather, it would be established through the Samaritans coming to the salvation that had been proclaimed to the Jews from the beginning and that had now found its fulfillment in Christ.

For that reason, there can be no unity or compromise with those who deny the lordship of Christ, whether through theological statements that deny the reality of Jesus as the Son of God, or through practice that

demonstrates effective unbelief. We are not to welcome all professing Christians indiscriminately, as if what you believe was a matter of small importance. Instead, the New Testament teaches us that we are to refuse to have anything to do with those who teach false doctrine (2 John 10–11). Nor are we to ignore gross sin in our midst, but rather we should exercise appropriate church discipline on those who have sinned, for the sake of their souls (1 Cor. 5:1–5). For our oneness as God's people is based on the rule of Christ over his church and his work of building his saints together into a holy temple, fit for his habitation.

Some divisions may therefore continue to be necessary "to show which of you have God's approval," as Paul puts it (1 Cor. 11:19). There will presumably also continue to be doctrines about which real Christians disagree, which for the sake of peace and harmony in the present may necessitate different denominations. Nonetheless, we should not be in any doubt about God's desire for the church and his eternal purpose for the church—that we may all be one even as the Father and the Son are one (John 17:21).

That purpose will ultimately be accomplished by Christ's work of complete sanctification of his people. There will be no doctrinal disagreements in heaven, for we will all understand perfectly, even as we are perfectly understood (cf. 1 Cor. 13:12). In the meantime, given the clear biblical statements of God's purpose and plan, we all need to search our hearts and consider what we personally have done and are doing to give true biblical unity its fullest possible present expression. How are we responding to Paul's admonition to the divided Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 1:10?

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.

Ezekiel 38–39

The word of the LORD came to me: ²"Son of man, set your face against Gog, of the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal; prophesy against him ³and say: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against you, O Gog, chief prince of Meshech and Tubal. ⁴I will turn you around, put hooks in your jaws and bring you out with your whole army—your horses, your horsemen fully armed, and a great horde with large and small shields, all of them brandishing their swords. ⁵Persia, Cush and Put will be with them, all with shields and helmets, ⁶also Gomer with all its troops, and Beth Togarmah from the far north with all its troops—the many nations with you.

7" 'Get ready; be prepared, you and all the hordes gathered about you, and take command of them.

8After many days you will be called to arms. In future years you will invade a land that has recovered from war, whose people were gathered from many nations to the mountains of Israel, which had long been desolate. They had been brought out from the nations, and now all of them live in safety.

9You and all your troops and the many nations with you will go up, advancing like a storm; you will be like a cloud covering the land.

10" 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: On that day thoughts will come into your mind and you will devise an evil scheme. ¹¹You will say, "I will invade a land of unwalled villages; I will attack a peaceful and unsuspecting people—all of them living without walls and without gates and bars. ¹²I will plunder and loot and turn my hand against the resettled ruins and the people gathered from the

nations, rich in livestock and goods, living at the center of the land." ¹³Sheba and Dedan and the merchants of Tarshish and all her villages will say to you, "Have you come to plunder? Have you gathered your hordes to loot, to carry off silver and gold, to take away livestock and goods and to seize much plunder?" '

¹⁴"Therefore, son of man, prophesy and say to Gog: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: In that day, when my people Israel are living in safety, will you not take notice of it? ¹⁵You will come from your place in the far north, you and many nations with you, all of them riding on horses, a great horde, a mighty army. ¹⁶You will advance against my people Israel like a cloud that covers the land. In days to come, O Gog, I will bring you against my land, so that the nations may know me when I show myself holy through you before their eyes.

17" 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Are you not the one I spoke of in former days by my servants the prophets of Israel? At that time they prophesied for years that I would bring you against them. ¹⁸This is what will happen in that day: When Gog attacks the land of Israel, my hot anger will be aroused, declares the Sovereign LORD. ¹⁹In my zeal and fiery wrath I declare that at that time there shall be a great earthquake in the land of Israel. ²⁰The fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the beasts of the field, every creature that moves along the ground, and all the people on the face of the earth will tremble at my presence. The mountains will be overturned, the cliffs will crumble and every wall will fall to the ground. ²¹I will summon a sword against Gog on all my mountains, declares the Sovereign LORD. Every man's sword will be against his brother. ²²I will execute judgment upon him with

plague and bloodshed; I will pour down torrents of rain, hailstones and burning sulfur on him and on his troops and on the many nations with him. ²³And so I will show my greatness and my holiness, and I will make myself known in the sight of many nations. Then they will know that I am the LORD.'

^{39:1}"Son of man, prophesy against Gog and say: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against you, O Gog, chief prince of Meshech and Tubal. ²I will turn you around and drag you along. I will bring you from the far north and send you against the mountains of Israel. ³Then I will strike your bow from your left hand and make your arrows drop from your right hand. ⁴On the mountains of Israel you will fall, you and all your troops and the nations with you. I will give you as food to all kinds of carrion birds and to the wild animals. ⁵You will fall in the open field, for I have spoken, declares the Sovereign LORD. ⁶I will send fire on Magog and on those who live in safety in the coastlands, and they will know that I am the LORD.

7" 'I will make known my holy name among my people Israel. I will no longer let my holy name be profaned, and the nations will know that I the LORD am the Holy One in Israel. ⁸It is coming! It will surely take place, declares the Sovereign LORD. This is the day I have spoken of.

9" 'Then those who live in the towns of Israel will go out and use the weapons for fuel and burn them up—the small and large shields, the bows and arrows, the war clubs and spears. For seven years they will use them for fuel. ¹⁰They will not need to gather wood from the fields or cut it from the forests, because they will use the weapons for fuel. And they will plunder those who plundered them

and loot those who looted them, declares the Sovereign LORD.

11" 'On that day I will give Gog a burial place in Israel, in the valley of those who travel east toward the Sea. It will block the way of travelers, because Gog and all his hordes will be buried there. So it will be called the Valley of Hamon Gog.

¹²" 'For seven months the house of Israel will be burying them in order to cleanse the land. ¹³All the people of the land will bury them, and the day I am glorified will be a memorable day for them, declares the Sovereign LORD.

¹⁴" 'Men will be regularly employed to cleanse the land. Some will go throughout the land and, in addition to them, others will bury those that remain on the ground. At the end of the seven months they will begin their search. ¹⁵As they go through the land and one of them sees a human bone, he will set up a marker beside it until the gravediggers have buried it in the Valley of Hamon Gog. ¹⁶(Also a town called Hamonah will be there.) And so they will cleanse the land.'

17"Son of man, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Call out to every kind of bird and all the wild animals: 'Assemble and come together from all around to the sacrifice I am preparing for you, the great sacrifice on the mountains of Israel. There you will eat flesh and drink blood. ¹⁸You will eat the flesh of mighty men and drink the blood of the princes of the earth as if they were rams and lambs, goats and bulls—all of them fattened animals from Bashan. ¹⁹At the sacrifice I am preparing for you, you will eat fat till you are glutted and drink blood till you are drunk. ²⁰At my table you will eat your fill of horses and riders, mighty men and soldiers of every kind,' declares the Sovereign LORD.

²¹"I will display my glory among the nations, and all the nations will see the punishment I inflict and the hand I lay upon them. ²²From that day forward the house of Israel will know that I am the LORD their God. ²³And the nations will know that the people of Israel went into exile for their sin, because they were unfaithful to me. So I hid my face from them and handed them over to their enemies, and they all fell by the sword. ²⁴I dealt with them according to their uncleanness and their offenses, and I hid my face from them.

²⁵"Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will now bring Jacob back from captivity and will have compassion on all the people of Israel, and I will be zealous for my holy name. ²⁶They will forget their shame and all the unfaithfulness they showed toward me when they lived in safety in their land with no one to make them afraid. ²⁷When I have brought them back from the nations and have gathered them from the countries of their enemies, I will show myself holy through them in the sight of many nations. ²⁸Then they will know that I am the LORD their God, for though I sent them into exile among the nations, I will gather them to their own land, not leaving any behind. ²⁹I will no longer hide my face from them, for I will pour out my Spirit on the house of Israel, declares the Sovereign LORD."

Original Meaning

EZEKIEL 38 AND 39 form a single unit made up of two panels that describe the defeat of Gog (38:1–23) and the disposal of Gog (39:1–29). Together, the two panels depict the ultimate onslaught of evil against God's apparently helpless people and God's decisive intervention to deliver them from the threat to end all threats. While this depiction may not seem as likely to induce hope in the hearts of Ezekiel's readers as the idyllic

descriptions of the future that precede it, it nonetheless serves the same essential purpose. If an enemy such as Gog cannot separate God's people from the good future he has planned for them, then neither can any lesser evil. In the words of Paul in Romans 8:35–39, as he reflects on the significance for daily life of the resurrection of Christ, which demonstrated God's victory over the final enemy, death:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Defeat of Gog (38:1–23)

THE ORACLE OPENS with a summons to Gog and his allies to arm themselves and to prepare an assault against God's people dwelling peacefully on the mountains of Israel (38:2–9). Gog has frequently been identified with a seventh-century B.C. king of Lydia, who appears under the name $g\hat{u}gu$ in the *Annals of Ashurbanipal*, also known to us as Gyges in the writings of the ancient Greek historian Herodotus.² However, in neither instance do the supposed comparisons shed much light on the biblical Gog: $g\hat{u}gu$ is merely one more in a line of minor kings who initially assisted the Assyrians, then rebelled against them, and was destroyed by the steamroller of the Assyrian army. From the perspective of the Assyrian annalist, he is a mere roadkill on the highway of empire.

Herodotus, on the other hand, seems more interested in the bizarre way in which Gyges acquired his throne than what he did after he gained it. He records in detail how Candaules, the king of Lydia, forced Gyges, who was his general, to view his queen in a state of undress in order to convince him of her outstanding beauty. The queen, when she became aware of what had transpired, was understandably distressed by her husband's unseemly behavior. In a response appropriate for a Greek history, she then required

Gyges to kill his master, which he in turn accomplished fittingly by hiding in the very same spot where he saw her naked. This is how Gyges became king of Lydia.³

Now this is material that has the elements of a splendid Shakespearean play (sex, violence, intrigue, a foreign location) but really doesn't help us much with our understanding of Gog. In neither of the above cases does the historical figure seem to justify the language of commentators describing Gog as "a great figure of the past . . . as we might speak fearfully of a new Hitler." Rather, the Gog of Ezekiel transcends historical categories and takes on mythical proportions, rather like the figure of Arnold Schwarzenegger in the movie *The Terminator*. He is the sort of person who when he drives up to your house would deliberately drive over your kid's toy truck in the driveway, just for fun. Gog is thoroughly "bad to the bone." You can easily imagine Ezekiel's Gog saying "Hasta la vista, baby!" before he blows someone away.

The biblical Gog is no mere historical figure, then, but rather a fear-inducing figure of cosmic proportions; and to make matters worse, he is not alone. He is the commander-in-chief $(n^e s \hat{i} r \bar{o} s)^6$ of a coalition of forces gathered from the ends of the earth. He himself is from the land of Magog, and he rules over Meshech-Tubal. His allies include Persia, Cush, and Put (38:5), along with Gomer and Beth Togarmah (38:6). It is no coincidence that together these make up a total of seven nations, and it is significant that they are gathered from the uttermost parts of the world known to the prophet. Meshech-Tubal, Gomer, and Beth Togarmah come from the north, Put (northwest Egypt) and Cush (southern Egypt) from the south and west, while Persia is to the east of Judah.⁷

There is a kind of cosmic reversal of Isaiah 2:2–4 here. Here Ezekiel foresees the nations streaming towards God's holy land in the latter days, not (as in Isaiah) to receive his law or to turn their swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, but to take up their weapons in the "mother of all battles" against the Sovereign Lord and his people. But even such an act of rebellion is itself instigated by God. Though Gog and his allies are far from unwilling participants in the coming conflict, yet the controlling force in all this is the Lord, who directs them by "hooks in your jaws" (Ezek. 38:4).

Once the unholy alliance has been prepared by God, he will summon them against his restored people at a time of his own choosing. Israel is depicted in terms borrowed from Ezekiel 34–37: They have been regathered from the nations to the mountains of Israel; now they live in safety (38:8), a peaceful, unsuspecting, and undefended people (38:11), grown rich in livestock and goods (38:12). They are dwelling "at the center of the land [earth]" (38:12), a description that is theological rather than geographical. Literally, they are dwelling "at the navel of the earth," the location that had expressed Jerusalem's election in 5:5. This position at the center of God's favor, which Jerusalem had forfeited through her sin, has now been restored to the land.⁸

This description of the state of God's people underlines the motives of the evil alliance. They find no justification for their assault in Israel's behavior. Israel is at rest, trusting in the Lord, not in alliances with foreign nations. In that trust she is prospering, experiencing the blessings of covenant faithfulness. Yet trust in the Lord does not eliminate the possibility of conflict. The ungodly, who dwell in "the far north" (38:6, 15; 39:2), will cast greedy eyes in Israel's direction, encouraged by the traders from east and west (38:13), and will advance against them like an overshadowing cloud (38:9, 16).

But in spite of all his planning and preparation, Gog has fundamentally misread the match-up. It is not a matter, as he supposes, of his vast and well-equipped army ranged against a defenseless nation (38:14–16). Rather, by tangling with Israel Gog is taking on Israel's God; this is "my people" and "my land" that he is assaulting. The relationship between God, his people, and his land has been restored, and such an assault on the Lord's name will not pass unchallenged. Indeed, the only reason for Gog's being permitted to come—or, to put it positively as the text does, the reason for which Gog and his allies are brought against Israel—is so that the Lord may demonstrate his greatness and his holiness in defeating this monstrous alliance (38:16). As in the days of Pharaoh, Gog will serve as an object lesson for the nations of the Lord's power and of his love for his people.

Therefore, the judgment of God falls on Gog in Ezek. 38:17–22. The question of verse 17, "Are you . . . the one I spoke of in former days by my servants the prophets of Israel?" asks whether Gog is the "foe from the north" depicted in passages such as Jeremiah 4–6. The answer to that

question has been variously rendered. The NIV, along with many commentators, clearly presupposes the positive answer: "Yes, you are." However, the form of the Hebrew question is entirely open and can be equally easily answered, "No, you are not!" Had Gog been the prophesied "foe from the north," he would have been coming at the Lord's commissioning to bring judgment on his faithless people. Nothing and no one would have been able to stand against him. But this foe, though geographically from the north, is coming not to bring judgment but to be judged. The prophecies of Jeremiah 4–6 have already found their fulfillment in the coming of the Babylonians; never again will God deal with his people in that way.

Instead, the judgments that earlier fell on his people now fall on their enemies. God's hot anger, zeal, and fiery wrath are all emotions of which Israel has felt the weight in the earlier chapters of Ezekiel. Now these same feelings are turned against Gog (Ezek. 38:18–19). The divine warrior will let loose a mighty earthquake, which will cause all creatures to tremble in his presence (38:19–20). The sword, plague, bloodshed, torrential rain, hail, burning sulfur—judgments, most of which were experienced first by Israel—are now experienced by her enemies (38:21–22). Now God will reveal his power and holiness to the nations not by the destruction of his unholy people but by the protection of his restored people (38:23).

The Disposal of Gog (39:1–29)

IN EZEKIEL 39 the focus shifts from the Lord's emotions to his actions, from the protection of his people to the utter destruction of his enemies. Ezekiel begins by announcing the slaughter of Gog (39:1–8). Like Goliath before him, his seemingly invincible power will be broken and his body left exposed for the birds of the air and the beasts of the field (39:4; cf. 1 Sam. 17:46). The fire of God's wrath will be poured out on his homeland and the homelands of his allies (Ezek. 39:6). The destruction they had planned to wreak on a people living "in safety" will return on their own heads (39:6; cf. 38:8).

Unlike past times when, because of his people's sins, the Lord had allowed his name to be profaned by bringing on them the catastrophe of exile (36:22–23), this time the Lord will act to prevent such profanation by defending his people against all assault. This too will demonstrate the

holiness of his name by showing that his power to save is as mighty as his power to judge (39:7). The future salvation is as secure as the past catastrophic judgment: "It is coming! It will surely take place" (39:8; cf. 21:7).

Once God has decisively dealt with Gog as a threat, then for the first time Israel is called to act. She plays no part in winning the victory; she merely carries out the mopping-up operation of spoiling the corpses and disposing of the remains (39:9–16). The Israelites collect six kinds of weapons, which for seven years serve them for fuel (39:9). Ironically, these flammable materials seem to have been the only things not harmed by the descent of God's fiery wrath! Those who came to plunder are now plundered (39:10).

In addition to plundering the fallen, however, Israel will also be active in purifying the land by burying the corpses. The holy land must not be defiled by the ongoing presence of death. The whole house of Israel will be engaged in this burial process (39:12). After that, there will be a further period in which two squads of professional morticians will pass through the land, the first squad tagging human remains for the second squad to inter (39:15), until the whole of Gog's army is safely laid to rest "in the Valley of Hamon [the Horde of] Gog." Although the vocabulary is different, it is tempting to see in this army reduced to a valley of bones through the death-dealing activity of the Lord a reversal of Ezekiel 37, where the Lord's lifegiving Spirit turned a valley of dry bones into a living army.

The dramatic, though not the chronological, climax comes in 39:17–20. Here the birds and the beasts are invited to come to join in a kind of gruesome "messianic banquet." But on this occasion, instead of animals being slain to feed the appetites of the human guests from north and south and east and west, here the humans have been slain to feed the animals from all around.¹²

The lesson Israel is to draw from these chapters is explicitly laid out for them in 39:21–29. The Lord is sovereign in history, a sovereignty that is displayed before the nations in two separate movements. (1) In the first, God demonstrated his sovereignty by sending his own people into exile because of their sin and unfaithfulness (39:23). He hid his face from them, and as a result they became easy prey for all their enemies.

(2) But in the days to come a new period in Israel's history is beginning. God's people will return from exile; he will have compassion on them. This

change in their fortunes will cause them to "bear their shame" ($w^e n \bar{a} s' \hat{u}$ 'et- $k^e limm \bar{a} t \bar{a} m$, 39:26). That is, they will take responsibility for their past actions when they are restored to their land and dwell in safety. Then they will know that it is the Lord their God who sent them into exile, and the Lord their God who returns them from exile (39:28). The tragic events of 586 B.C. will never repeat themselves, for the covenant-keeping God will pour out his Spirit on his people, as he once poured out his wrath on them, and he will never again hide his face from them (39:29).

Bridging Contexts

IDENTIFICATIONS THROUGHOUT HISTORY. Perhaps few Old Testament passages have seen so many attempts to interpret them in the light of current events as Ezekiel 38-39. This is hardly a new phenomenon. The church father Ambrose, writing in the late fourth century, confidently identified Gog as the Goths.14 In the seventh century, Gog and Magog were the Arab armies that threatened the Holy Land. 15 By the thirteenth century, Gog had become a cipher for the Mongol hordes from the East.¹⁶ William Greenhill, writing in the seventeenth century, records the opinion of some contemporaries who identified Gog as the Roman emperor, the Pope, or the Turks.¹⁷ In the nineteenth century, against the background of the tensions in Asia Minor that culminated in the Crimean War, Wilhelm Gesenius identified Rosh as Russia.¹⁸ This view was subsequently popularized by the Scofield Reference Bible, along with the idea taken from other sources that "Meshech" and "Tubal" are the Russian cities of Moscow and Tobolsk.¹⁹ During the First World War, Arno Gaebelein argued that Gomer was Germany.20

More recently, in response to the rise of Communism, these ideas have become the staples of popular dispensational end-times literature, to which has in some cases been added the contemporary threat of the Red Chinese, usually identified as "the kings from the East" in Revelation 16:12.21 With its vivid imagery and pictorial language, apocalyptic (or more precisely, proto-apocalyptic) literature such as Ezekiel 38–39 lends itself to a flexible application to whatever the contemporary dangers to world peace are perceived to be. In a world of much tribulation, there will always be a plausible explanation of why these times in particular fit the description of the biblical "end times."

There are numerous factual flaws in these identifications. In the first place, the earliest attestation of the name "Rus" (Russia) dates back to the mid-ninth century A.D. and is thought to have been brought to the area around Kiev by the Vikings.²² It is etymologically unrelated to the Hebrew term, and modern lexicons have universally rejected Gesenius's claim.²³ Nor can Meshech and Tubal be linked with Moscow and Tobolsk. Rather, they are to be linked with the *Mushku* and *Tabal* peoples of central and eastern Anatolia, who are well known in cuneiform texts from the first half of the first millennium B.C.²⁴

Gomer is similarly known to us from cuneiform texts as the warlike *gimirrai* (known from Greek sources as "Cimmerians"). This people apparently originated in the Crimea, but were pushed southward across the Caucasus by the Scythians at the end of the eighth century B.C.²⁵ Though the Babylonian Talmud does identify Gomer as the area of "Germania" (or "Kermania"),²⁶ the Targum Neofiti on Genesis 10:2 rather identifies Germania as the district of Magog! In addition, although Gomer may etymologically be related equally well to the Welsh (*cymri*) as to the proto-Germanic tribes,²⁷ yet one may observe that the Welsh have not typically played a significant role in the descriptions of the last days.

However, even if correct identifications were to be made on the basis of sound linguistic and archaeological data, attempts to isolate particular nations as "Israel's last enemies" fly in the face of what the text is saying. The point of Ezekiel 38–39 is not that at some distant point in future history these *particular* nations will oppose Israel, while others (America? Britain?) will rally to her aid. Rather, these seven nations from the ends of the earth, from all four points of the compass, represent symbolically a supreme attempt by the united forces of evil to crush the peace of God's people. This, not coincidentally, is the interpretation given to "Gog and Magog" in Revelation 20:8: They represent "the nations in the four corners of the earth," whom Satan gathers for the final battle against God's people, the city he loves.²⁸ Their defeat in Revelation is the prerequisite for the establishment of the new Jerusalem, the heavenly city of Revelation 21, which itself has many points of contact with Ezekiel's visionary temple in Ezekiel 40–48.

Ezekiel 38–39 in biblical context. The key to understanding what Ezekiel 38–39 are about—both for its original hearers and for us—lies in

recognizing whereabouts in the book of Ezekiel we are at this point. The first twenty-four chapters of Ezekiel, after a brief record of the initial call of the prophet, prophesy an unmitigated pronouncement of judgment on God's people and city. Jerusalem and her inhabitants are finished because of their idolatry and other sins. The Lord has abandoned his people, and it is only a matter of time before they experience the full outpouring of his wrath through the Babylonians.

Ezekiel 25–32 then gives a series of oracles against the foreign nations, pronouncing judgment on those who participated or delighted in Israel's downfall. The presence of these oracles affirms that God has not turned his back on his people utterly. He has not switched sides and gone over to her enemies. The promise to Abraham given in Genesis 12:3, that "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse," is still in effect—at least, the second half of the promise.

Then Ezekiel 33 records the turning point in the fortunes of God's people when the news of Jerusalem's fall comes to the prophet. Now God's wrath has been satisfied and there is a prospect of a new beginning. That new beginning is outlined in terms of a restoration of the leadership of the people (the shepherds, ch. 34), the land itself (35:1–36:15), and the people who indwell the land (chs. 36–37), culminating in the glorious statements of Ezek. 37:24–28:

My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees. They will live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children will live there forever, and David my servant will be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. Then the nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever.

But there is a potential problem at this point. Perhaps Israel can be restored and returned to her own land. But what happens then? What is to say that the whole weary cycle of sin and judgment in the shape of an invading army will not begin all over again, as in the days of the book of Judges? It is this question that Ezekiel 38–39 seeks to answer. The purpose of the oracle against Gog becomes clear in 39:21–29; it is intended as a word of reassurance to Israel that the new order of existence promised in chapters 34–37 is not reversible. God will never again turn his face away from his people (39:29). Though trials of all kinds, even the worst imaginable kind, may and will come, they will do so only under God's good and sovereign hand.

The symbolism in Ezekiel 38–39. In fact, even identifying Ezekiel 38–39 as "proto-apocalyptic" may be leading us down the wrong interpretative path. For though these two chapters share a number of features with later apocalyptic, such as symbolism and a schematic view of history, they also have a great deal in common with nonapocalyptic writings. It is especially close thematically to the psalms of Zion's security, where the nations gather together against Jerusalem, only to be repulsed by the Lord (Ps. 2; 46; 48; 76).²⁹

The common motif of the attack by the nations against the Lord's dwelling place, the center of the earth, has been transferred by the prophet from Jerusalem itself to the mountains of Israel. This fits with his avoidance of the name of Jerusalem in his prophecies of restoration: Even the city of Ezekiel 48 bears a different name, while the mountains of Israel are for Ezekiel the heart of the Promised Land. The timeless present of the psalm has been transposed to the indefinite future of "after many days" (38:8), but the essential message of the psalmist remains unchanged. The conclusion of Psalm 46 sums up Ezekiel 38–39 equally well:

Come and see the works of the LORD, the desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire.

"Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations,

I will be exalted in the earth."
The LORD Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. (Ps. 46:8–11)

The significance in this correlation lies in the fact that the "last battle," as depicted in Ezekiel 38–39, is not *qualitatively* different from the everyday battles that face us. The "mother of all battles" differs only in terms of size from the ongoing battles that we as believers face from day to day, not in terms of kind. Just as "the Antichrist" is merely the last and greatest in a constant stream of "antichrists" (1 John 2:18), so also Gog and his foul friends who seek to destroy the restored Israel are simply the ultimate expression of a continual struggle in which Satan seeks to destroy the people of God (cf. Rev. 12:17).

Therefore, the message of Ezekiel 38–39 is not a coded message for those who live in "the last days," who by carefully unlocking its secrets will be able to determine the symbolic identity of the key participants in the final struggle. Rather, it is a word of encouragement to all the saints of all times and places that no matter what the forces of evil may do, God's purpose and victory stands secure. If God can defeat the combined forces of Gog and his allies and turn them into fodder for the crows and carrioneaters, how much more can he take care of us, whatever historical manifestation of the enmity of Satan we face.

The ultimate problem with the approach to the Bible that reads Ezekiel 38–39 alongside the morning newspaper in an attempt to correlate the events described in the two documents is that it assumes that unless we are living in the end times, these passages have nothing to say to us. In fact, whether or not these happen to be the final days of God's plan for the world, Ezekiel 38–39 addresses believers with a powerful message of hope. As we noted at the outset of this section, it functions in a thematically similar way to the empty tomb in the New Testament: It is God's ultimate demonstration of power and care for his people in the face of the worst possible scenario. In the light of the resurrection of Christ, why should we fear the more everyday challenges that life throws at us? Even death cannot separate us from such love.

Contemporary Significance

Contemporary doomsday scenarios. As we approach the end of the second millennium A.D., secular "apocalypses" abound. In our time, we see growing numbers of doomsday scenarios propounded, based around environmental or other perceived hazards to the future of life on planet earth. We worry about global warming and El Niño, about asteroids colliding with the earth, or about political instability in the Balkans, the Middle East, and the former Soviet Union. We fear the possibility of a holocaust created by nuclear or bacteriological warfare. As a reflex of our fears, we dream up cataclysmic adventures on the big screen, in which world peace and "life as we know it" is dramatically threatened, and then against all odds finally saved.³¹

This theme is treated in classic form in the movies *The Terminator* and its sequel *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*.³² In these popular films, Skynet, a computerized defense system in the "Star Wars" mold, reaches self-awareness and in response to attempts by humans to power it down, triggers a nuclear holocaust. Human resistance against the autonomous machines is led by the feisty messianic figure, John Connor (whose initials are hardly coincidental).³³ In an effort at a preemptive strike, the Skynet sends a mechanical assassin, one of the seemingly all-powerful terminators, back from the future to terminate his mother's life before his birth. Having failed with its initial attempt, in the sequel the system makes a second attempt on John Connor's life when he is a young adolescent.

Such popular apocalyptic scenarios have been around for a while. Over a century ago, in *The War of the Worlds*, H. G. Wells painted a chilling picture of an invasion of a hostile superior life-form from Mars, against which all human military technology was powerless, instantly vaporized by their "heat ray." This life-form fed on human blood and began a program of world domination, which would inevitably (it appeared) mean the end of any recognizable human civilization. Only the intervention of common bacteria, against which the advanced Martians had long ceased to require immunity, prevented the total massacre of the human race.

Wells was ahead of his time, out of step with the general optimism of the Victorian and Edwardian eras. Probably the first significant chink in the armor of a near-universal hope of invincible human progress occurred on April 15, 1912 with the sinking of the *Titanic*. With its descent into the icy

depths of the North Atlantic, it took the lives of 1,513 people and created a fault line in the belief of unstoppable progress. The First World War and the depression that followed crushed forever the naive optimism of the previous generation. Together, those events brought us into the era in which we now live, which W. H. Auden dubbed the "Age of Anxiety." Since then, we have lived in the shadow of the end of the world.

Of course, as we noted above, we are by no means the first generation to have this experience. In the fifth century, when the Goths sacked Rome, those who lived through the event felt as if it was the end of the world. Similar threats to "life as we know it" in medieval Europe came from the Moors in the early Middle Ages and the Mongols in the late Middle Ages, and marked out those time periods also as ones of great anxiety. Throughout the course of human history the end of the world has been regularly threatened and has occasionally happened. To date, life goes on.

Living in the shadow of the end of the world. It is the habit of those who live in the shadow of the end of the world, or whose world seems to be ending, to tell themselves stories. These stories, in general, focus on how the end of the world is to be avoided. In *The War of the Worlds*, the final cataclysm is averted unexpectedly, almost accidentally (from a human perspective), through the protective forces of Nature, represented by the all-powerful microbes. In contrast, in the *Terminator* movies human ingenuity and determination triumph over brute strength, and thus humanity is saved.

Christians naturally, and rightly, respond to the general atmosphere of end-of-the-world anxieties by turning from the world's stories to God's stories. At times like this, many turn to the apocalyptic literature of the Scriptures, such as Ezekiel 38–39 or the books of Daniel and Revelation, seeking an infallible word from the Lord. But what do you do with these stories? Many contemporary Christians treat these passages as checklists on the road to Armageddon, providing a countdown on the road to the end of the world. However, as we have shown above, this is not how the passage was intended to be read. Rather, it is a dramatic statement of the central truth that no matter what the forces of evil may throw at God's people, in the final analysis God's purpose and victory stand secure. For all Gog's bravado, ultimately it is God who says, "Go ahead; make my day!"

Do you see how comforting this truth is for all of us? Christians have, historically, suffered a great deal for their faith. From the time of Nero,

when Christians were dipped in pitch and set alight to illumine the emperor's pleasure gardens, down to the present day, when believers continue to be tortured and killed for their faith in Sudan and elsewhere, the spiritual forces of opposition are real. Often those forces are institutional rather than individual, an organized and orchestrated attempt to destroy the church. For those enduring such times of persecution, Ezekiel 38–39 provides a powerful message of hope.

(1) Although this world is a place of tribulation, God is in control. Gog has his own evil reasons for acting (38:10), but even his wickedly motivated plans can achieve nothing other than what God purposes (38:4). Gog comes intent on plunder, but he does so only because God's plan and purpose is to bring him. Gog's free will is the free will of a shackled lion. If you offer a lion a choice between a fresh green salad and a juicy piece of raw meat, he will choose the latter every time, without compulsion; it is his nature to eat raw meat. But the shackled lion only gets to eat raw meat when his keeper chooses to allow him to.

This is a perspective on persecution and martyrdom that we are not used to thinking about. We tend to assume that martyrdom is an unfortunate but necessary by-product of human free will, a sad fact of life in some parts of the world, but a sign that the world is out of order. Our problem is that we live in a dangerous world populated by lions roaming on the loose, so we tend to think. Not so. The Bible tells us that the lions are real, but they are shackled, or rather, to change the image slightly, they are leashed. They can assault Christians only whenever and wherever God allows them to exercise their natural appetites. What this means is that martyrdom is not merely an occasional abnormality in the church's existence with evangelistic possibilities; it is, at times, nothing less than the will of God for his church.

In other words, God himself may bring tribulation on his people, just as he brings Gog. The reason for that apparently strange fact is that the blood of the martyrs is not merely the seed of the church, but is a sign of the kingdom. It is not merely by our love that the world will know that Christians are Christ's disciples, but by our blood. The disciples are not greater than their master, who was brutally beaten and savagely murdered on a cruel cross. Jesus himself said:

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. (Mark 8:34–35)

Jesus was not exaggerating or using hyperbole here. He meant exactly what he said. Martyrdom is a central part of God's strategy for bringing glory to himself through the church.

Thus, in Revelation 6:10, the martyrs under the altar cry out, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" You might expect that the answer given to their question would be: "Until the salvation of the full number of the elect. There must be more time for the evangelization of the world." Indeed, that is not a wrong answer; as Peter says concerning the Second Coming, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). But this is not the answer given to the martyred saints: They are told to wait until the full number of *martyrs* have been killed.

Our view of the world is turned on its head. Our automatic assumption is that God's will for us is peace and prosperity, at least if we are being good Christians, and that the obedient church should grow and prosper just like any well-run business. But we are wrong. God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life . . . but that wonderful plan might mean torture and death for the faith, or simply a life that seems, from the world's perspective, "wasted" ("lost," in Jesus' terms). Ezekiel 38–39 reminds us that even the restored, renewed people of God can expect tribulation, not because the world is out of control but precisely because the world is in God's control; for when God's people cling to him in their darkest hour, against all odds, it brings him glory. God's glory is the primary goal of history, not our happiness and comfort.

This focus requires us always to lift our eyes above the human plane of activity to the divine. When we stay on the human level in our consideration of our sufferings and the sufferings of others, we end up like Job's friends, searching for some hidden reason within us for the suffering. Philip Yancey lists some of the reasons people come up with:

- God is trying to teach you something. You should feel privileged, not bitter, about your opportunity to lean on him in faith.
- Meditate on the blessings you still enjoy—at least you are still alive. Are you a fair-weather believer?
- You are under-going a training regimen, a chance to exercise new muscles of faith. Don't worry—God will not test you beyond your endurance.
- Don't complain so loudly! You will forfeit this opportunity to demonstrate your faithfulness to unbelievers.
- Someone is always worse off than you. Give thanks despite your circumstances.³⁵

The problem is that each of these approaches seeks to find some good that the suffering will accomplish within us or within our circle of friends and acquaintances. In the providence of God, that may be the case. But it may not. We are also the players in a cosmic drama acted out before the heavenly hosts. In that play, "every act of faith by every one of the people of God is like the tolling of a bell, and a faith like Job's reverberates throughout the universe." God himself may bring tribulation into our life to bring himself glory through our obedient submission, following in the footsteps of our Master.

- (2) God is going to win. This may seem a simple, even simplistic, point, but it is central to the thrust of the Gog narrative. No matter how big the opposition, how well organized they are, how powerful their weaponry, or how paltry the resources of God's people, ultimately the plans of God's enemies will come to nothing. As in Psalm 2, the nations may conspire together and the kings of the earth take a stand against God, but all their posturing causes mirth rather than worry in the heart of the Most High. Ultimately, no matter what Satan throws against the church, the full number of the elect from the north and south and east and west will be brought in and will sit down together at God's table to share in the heavenly feast.
- (3) God's victory means the ultimate destruction of all those who oppose him. Gog and his army end up as a massive array of corpses, scattered on the face of the earth. Their weaponry is useless against God's cosmic

arsenal of fire and earthquake, hailstones and burning sulfur (Ezek. 38:19–22). Those who came to plunder will end up themselves plundered. Once again adopting the language of Psalm 2, Gog will be terrified in God's wrath, dashed in pieces like pottery, and destroyed along the way. It is foolishness to oppose God, and all who do so will come to a sticky end. Those who turn away from God and refuse the sacrifice of Christ have nothing to expect except certain judgment and the raging fire that will consume the enemies of God (Heb. 10:27). We need to take seriously his admonition: "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (10:31).

Do we fathom the significance of this reality for our neighbors, coworkers, and relatives who do not know Christ? In her article "A Stone Cold Fact," Joni Eareckson Tada presses us to see in concrete terms what this means:

Lord, do you mean my third-grade teacher? The women who run the day-care center where I take my child? My mailman? My housekeeper? The lady who teaches the quilting class down the street? The bank teller who's always telling me jokes? If these people don't know Jesus, they won't "rise to live." ³⁷

(4) God's victory means the ultimate security of those who trust in him. In Ezekiel 38–39, Israel does not have to lift a finger in her own defense. Those who take refuge in the Lord find blessing and security (Ps. 2:12); God is their refuge and strength, an ever present help in time of trouble (46:1). The certainty of God's victory should be a source of confidence for the believer as he or she faces an uncertain world: You are God's special property and he knows how to take care of his own. You are the apple of his eye, as Zechariah 2 expresses it. As the apostle Paul put it: "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:31–32). Your confidence rests in this: that Almighty God has committed himself to those who trust in him and he will never give them up. Paul reminds us in another place: "I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able guard what I have entrusted to him for that

day" (2 Tim. 1:12). The God who will defeat the evil empire of Gog can take care of you also.

The central point. This last point is, it seems to me, the central thrust of Ezekiel 38–39, as the final verses of chapter 39 make clear. Why was Ezekiel 38–39 good news for Ezekiel's original audience? Because it made clear the fact that the events of 586 B.C. could never be repeated. Israel had once because of her sin so polluted the land that it had become totally unfit for divine habitation (39:23). But when God reverses that situation and regathers his people, he will pour out his Spirit in the same measure as he once poured out his wrath (39:29). This will bring about a radical change in the hearts of his people and in the security of his presence with them, such that he will never again hide his face from them. Though tribulations, such as the assault by Gog, will continue, they will no longer be marks of God's wrath but opportunities for God to uncover his power to the world.

Why is Ezekiel 38–39 good news for us? It is because this is precisely the relationship with God in which we, as Christians, stand. Once we too were objects of God's wrath because of our sins (Eph. 2:2–3). Our hearts were too polluted to receive his presence. But now, because of the work of Christ on the cross, we too have been gathered into God's people. We are no longer under condemnation, but have received the Spirit, by whom we have been adopted into God's family. Therefore, we have the settled assurance that God will never leave us nor forsake us (Heb. 13:5–6). Troubles may and will come. No matter where we are on God's "prophetic timetable," that reality remains unchanged. But to us as Christians, troubles come now not as visitations of God's wrath on us but as opportunities for God to uncover his power to the world.

There are two ways in which God may uncover his power to the world in our situation of distress. (1) That power may be uncovered by means of a remarkable deliverance, whereby we are rescued from the midst of our trials, as when Daniel was kept safe in the lions' den or Peter was set free from prison. In that case, we will have the testimony that will launch a thousand books.

(2) But that is not the only way in which God reveals his existence and power in the world. In other cases, God's power may be uncovered by enabling us to withstand tribulation firmly until the end, as when Stephen was given a vision of the ascended Jesus to strengthen him as the

murderous stones pounded his body. Either way—whether we are delivered from our trials or endure suffering to the end for the sake of King Jesus—we find out for ourselves and demonstrate to the world and to the cosmic hosts the truth of the Lord's statement: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

Ezekiel 40–42

In the twenty-fifth year of our exile, at the beginning of the year, on the tenth of the month, in the fourteenth year after the fall of the city—on that very day the hand of the LORD was upon me and he took me there. ²In visions of God he took me to the land of Israel and set me on a very high mountain, on whose south side were some buildings that looked like a city. ³He took me there, and I saw a man whose appearance was like bronze; he was standing in the gateway with a linen cord and a measuring rod in his hand. ⁴The man said to me, "Son of man, look with your eyes and hear with your ears and pay attention to everything I am going to show you, for that is why you have been brought here. Tell the house of Israel everything you see."

⁵I saw a wall completely surrounding the temple area. The length of the measuring rod in the man's hand was six long cubits, each of which was a cubit and a handbreadth. He measured the wall; it was one measuring rod thick and one rod high.

⁶Then he went to the gate facing east. He climbed its steps and measured the threshold of the gate; it was one rod deep. ⁷The alcoves for the guards were one rod long and one rod wide, and the projecting walls between the alcoves were five cubits thick. And the threshold of the gate next to the portico facing the temple was one rod deep.

⁸Then he measured the portico of the gateway; ⁹it was eight cubits deep and its jambs were two cubits thick. The portico of the gateway faced the temple.

¹⁰Inside the east gate were three alcoves on each side; the three had the same measurements, and the faces of the projecting walls on each side had the

same measurements. ¹¹Then he measured the width of the entrance to the gateway; it was ten cubits and its length was thirteen cubits. ¹²In front of each alcove was a wall one cubit high, and the alcoves were six cubits square. ¹³Then he measured the gateway from the top of the rear wall of one alcove to the top of the opposite one; the distance was twenty-five cubits from one parapet opening to the opposite one. ¹⁴He measured along the faces of the projecting walls all around the inside of the gateway —sixty cubits. The measurement was up to the portico facing the courtyard. ¹⁵The distance from the entrance of the gateway to the far end of its portico was fifty cubits. ¹⁶The alcoves and the projecting walls inside the gateway were surmounted by narrow parapet openings all around, as was the portico; the openings all around faced inward. The faces of the projecting walls were decorated with palm trees.

¹⁷Then he brought me into the outer court. There I saw some rooms and a pavement that had been constructed all around the court; there were thirty rooms along the pavement. ¹⁸It abutted the sides of the gateways and was as wide as they were long; this was the lower pavement. ¹⁹Then he measured the distance from the inside of the lower gateway to the outside of the inner court; it was a hundred cubits on the east side as well as on the north.

²⁰Then he measured the length and width of the gate facing north, leading into the outer court. ²¹Its alcoves—three on each side—its projecting walls and its portico had the same measurements as those of the first gateway. It was fifty cubits long and twenty-five cubits wide. ²²Its openings, its portico and its palm tree decorations had the same measurements as those of the gate facing east. Seven

steps led up to it, with its portico opposite them. ²³There was a gate to the inner court facing the north gate, just as there was on the east. He measured from one gate to the opposite one; it was a hundred cubits.

²⁴Then he led me to the south side and I saw a gate facing south. He measured its jambs and its portico, and they had the same measurements as the others. ²⁵The gateway and its portico had narrow openings all around, like the openings of the others. It was fifty cubits long and twenty-five cubits wide. ²⁶Seven steps led up to it, with its portico opposite them; it had palm tree decorations on the faces of the projecting walls on each side. ²⁷The inner court also had a gate facing south, and he measured from this gate to the outer gate on the south side; it was a hundred cubits.

²⁸Then he brought me into the inner court through the south gate, and he measured the south gate; it had the same measurements as the others. ²⁹Its alcoves, its projecting walls and its portico had the same measurements as the others. The gateway and its portico had openings all around. It was fifty cubits long and twenty-five cubits wide. ³⁰(The porticoes of the gateways around the inner court were twenty-five cubits wide and five cubits deep.) ³¹Its portico faced the outer court; palm trees decorated its jambs, and eight steps led up to it.

³²Then he brought me to the inner court on the east side, and he measured the gateway; it had the same measurements as the others. ³³Its alcoves, its projecting walls and its portico had the same measurements as the others. The gateway and its portico had openings all around. It was fifty cubits long and twenty-five cubits wide. ³⁴Its portico faced

the outer court; palm trees decorated the jambs on either side, and eight steps led up to it.

³⁵Then he brought me to the north gate and measured it. It had the same measurements as the others, ³⁶as did its alcoves, its projecting walls and its portico, and it had openings all around. It was fifty cubits long and twenty-five cubits wide. ³⁷Its portico faced the outer court; palm trees decorated the jambs on either side, and eight steps led up to it.

³⁸A room with a doorway was by the portico in each of the inner gateways, where the burnt offerings were washed. ³⁹In the portico of the gateway were two tables on each side, on which the burnt offerings, sin offerings and guilt offerings were slaughtered. ⁴⁰By the outside wall of the portico of the gateway, near the steps at the entrance to the north gateway were two tables, and on the other side of the steps were two tables. ⁴¹So there were four tables on one side of the gateway and four on the other—eight tables in all—on which the sacrifices were slaughtered. ⁴²There were also four tables of dressed stone for the burnt offerings, each a cubit and a half long, a cubit and a half wide and a cubit high. On them were placed the utensils for slaughtering the burnt offerings and the other sacrifices. ⁴³And double-pronged hooks, each a handbreadth long, were attached to the wall all around. The tables were for the flesh of the offerings.

⁴⁴Outside the inner gate, within the inner court, were two rooms, one at the side of the north gate and facing south, and another at the side of the south gate and facing north. ⁴⁵He said to me, "The room facing south is for the priests who have charge of the temple, ⁴⁶and the room facing north is for the priests who have charge of the altar. These are the sons of

Zadok, who are the only Levites who may draw near to the LORD to minister before him."

⁴⁷Then he measured the court: It was square—a hundred cubits long and a hundred cubits wide. And the altar was in front of the temple.

⁴⁸He brought me to the portico of the temple and measured the jambs of the portico; they were five cubits wide on either side. The width of the entrance was fourteen cubits and its projecting walls were three cubits wide on either side. ⁴⁹The portico was twenty cubits wide, and twelve cubits from front to back. It was reached by a flight of stairs, and there were pillars on each side of the jambs.

41:1Then the man brought me to the outer sanctuary and measured the jambs; the width of the jambs was six cubits on each side. ²The entrance was ten cubits wide, and the projecting walls on each side of it were five cubits wide. He also measured the outer sanctuary; it was forty cubits long and twenty cubits wide.

³Then he went into the inner sanctuary and measured the jambs of the entrance; each was two cubits wide. The entrance was six cubits wide, and the projecting walls on each side of it were seven cubits wide. ⁴And he measured the length of the inner sanctuary; it was twenty cubits, and its width was twenty cubits across the end of the outer sanctuary. He said to me, "This is the Most Holy Place."

⁵Then he measured the wall of the temple; it was six cubits thick, and each side room around the temple was four cubits wide. ⁶The side rooms were on three levels, one above another, thirty on each level. There were ledges all around the wall of the temple to serve as supports for the side rooms, so that the supports were not inserted into the wall of

the temple. ⁷The side rooms all around the temple were wider at each successive level. The structure surrounding the temple was built in ascending stages, so that the rooms widened as one went upward. A stairway went up from the lowest floor to the top floor through the middle floor.

⁸I saw that the temple had a raised base all around it, forming the foundation of the side rooms. It was the length of the rod, six long cubits. ⁹The outer wall of the side rooms was five cubits thick. The open area between the side rooms of the temple ¹⁰and the priests' rooms was twenty cubits wide all around the temple. ¹¹There were entrances to the side rooms from the open area, one on the north and another on the south; and the base adjoining the open area was five cubits wide all around.

¹²The building facing the temple courtyard on the west side was seventy cubits wide. The wall of the building was five cubits thick all around, and its length was ninety cubits.

¹³Then he measured the temple; it was a hundred cubits long, and the temple courtyard and the building with its walls were also a hundred cubits long. ¹⁴The width of the temple courtyard on the east, including the front of the temple, was a hundred cubits.

¹⁵Then he measured the length of the building facing the courtyard at the rear of the temple, including its galleries on each side; it was a hundred cubits.

The outer sanctuary, the inner sanctuary and the portico facing the court, ¹⁶as well as the thresholds and the narrow windows and galleries around the three of them—everything beyond and including the threshold was covered with wood. The floor, the wall up to the windows, and the windows were covered.

¹⁷In the space above the outside of the entrance to the inner sanctuary and on the walls at regular intervals all around the inner and outer sanctuary ¹⁸were carved cherubim and palm trees. Palm trees alternated with cherubim. Each cherub had two faces: ¹⁹the face of a man toward the palm tree on one side and the face of a lion toward the palm tree on the other. They were carved all around the whole temple. ²⁰From the floor to the area above the entrance, cherubim and palm trees were carved on the wall of the outer sanctuary.

doorframe, and the one at the front of the Most Holy Place was similar. ²²There was a wooden altar three cubits high and two cubits square; its corners, its base and its sides were of wood. The man said to me, "This is the table that is before the LORD." ²³Both the outer sanctuary and the Most Holy Place had double doors. ²⁴Each door had two leaves—two hinged leaves for each door. ²⁵And on the doors of the outer sanctuary were carved cherubim and palm trees like those carved on the walls, and there was a wooden overhang on the front of the portico. ²⁶On the sidewalls of the portico were narrow windows with palm trees carved on each side. The side rooms of the temple also had overhangs.

42:1Then the man led me northward into the outer court and brought me to the rooms opposite the temple courtyard and opposite the outer wall on the north side. ²The building whose door faced north was a hundred cubits long and fifty cubits wide. ³Both in the section twenty cubits from the inner court and in the section opposite the pavement of the outer court, gallery faced gallery at the three levels. ⁴In front of the rooms was an inner passageway ten cubits wide and a hundred cubits long. Their doors

were on the north. ⁵Now the upper rooms were narrower, for the galleries took more space from them than from the rooms on the lower and middle floors of the building. ⁶The rooms on the third floor had no pillars, as the courts had; so they were smaller in floor space than those on the lower and middle floors. ⁷There was an outer wall parallel to the rooms and the outer court; it extended in front of the rooms for fifty cubits. ⁸While the row of rooms on the side next to the outer court was fifty cubits long, the row on the side nearest the sanctuary was a hundred cubits long. ⁹The lower rooms had an entrance on the east side as one enters them from the outer court.

¹⁰On the south side along the length of the wall of the outer court, adjoining the temple courtyard and opposite the outer wall, were rooms ¹¹with a passageway in front of them. These were like the rooms on the north; they had the same length and width, with similar exits and dimensions. Similar to the doorways on the north ¹²were the doorways of the rooms on the south. There was a doorway at the beginning of the passageway that was parallel to the corresponding wall extending eastward, by which one enters the rooms.

¹³Then he said to me, "The north and south rooms facing the temple courtyard are the priests' rooms, where the priests who approach the LORD will eat the most holy offerings. There they will put the most holy offerings—the grain offerings, the sin offerings and the guilt offerings—for the place is holy. ¹⁴Once the priests enter the holy precincts, they are not to go into the outer court until they leave behind the garments in which they minister, for these are holy. They are to put on other clothes before they go near the places that are for the people."

15When he had finished measuring what was inside the temple area, he led me out by the east gate and measured the area all around: ¹⁶He measured the east side with the measuring rod; it was five hundred cubits. ¹⁷He measured the north side; it was five hundred cubits by the measuring rod. ¹⁸He measured the south side; it was five hundred cubits by the measuring rod. ¹⁹Then he turned to the west side and measured; it was five hundred cubits by the measuring rod. ²⁰So he measured the area on all four sides. It had a wall around it, five hundred cubits long and five hundred cubits wide, to separate the holy from the common.

Original Meaning

IT IS CUSTOMARY for commentators, evangelical and critical alike, to apologize for Ezekiel 40–48. After the heady excitement of the re-creation of Israel in Ezekiel 37 and the apocalyptic battle of Ezekiel 38–39, worthy of the climax to an action-thriller movie of the *Die Hard* genre, the description of the dimensions of the new temple and the regulations for what kinds of sacrifices the prince can offer may seem tame stuff. However, this final vision forms the capstone and climax of the entire book and will, if properly understood, amply repay the labor of study.

As with the opening vision of Ezekiel (1:1–2), the present one opens with a double date formula: "In the twenty-fifth year of our exile, at the beginning of the year, on the tenth of the month, in the fourteenth year after the fall of the city—on that very day the hand of the LORD was upon me and he took me there" (40:1). Whereas the opening vision of the heavenly King on his throne had been dated from the exile of the earthly king, Jehoiachin, this vision of the heavenly city is dated from the destruction of the earthly city, Jerusalem.

Fourteen years have passed since that momentous, earth-shattering event, twenty-five since the beginning of the Exile. In these dates, especially the fact that the vision took place on the tenth of the first month, a reference to the Jubilee year is generally seen. On the tenth day of the seventh month,

the Day of Atonement, every fiftieth year, the trumpets were to be blown announcing a specially holy year, a year of proclaiming liberty throughout the land (Lev. 25:8–13). All land bought and sold in the intervening period was to be returned to its original owners, so that those who had lost their land and been reduced to slave status might return to their ancestral heritage (25:13).

It is not too hard to see what correlation might be drawn by the exiles between their present landless, enslaved state and the predicament of many in former times who lived in between Jubilees. The tenth day of the first month of the twenty-fifth year of exile, as the halfway point to the next Jubilee, was a natural time of looking forward to the release that the Lord had announced in Ezekiel 34–37.

It was on this very day that Ezekiel saw his "visions of God," whereby he was taken up to a high mountain in the land of Israel (40:2). This journey to a high mountain has several precursors in Israelite history. It is equivalent to Moses' ascent up Mount Sinai to receive the law of God; indeed, Ezekiel is the only person in the Old Testament apart from Moses who imparts God's legislation to the people.² But Moses also received on the mountaintop a detailed design for building the tabernacle and establishing its worship; Ezekiel is likewise shown a heavenly sanctuary and instructed about the requirements for its worship.³ As with another mountaintop experience of Moses, this time on Mount Nebo in the Abarim Range (Deut. 32:48–52), Ezekiel surveys the Promised Land that has been prepared for God's people, though he himself will never enter it.⁴ But the "very high mountain" also represents Mount Zion, the mountain of the temple, concerning which Isaiah had prophesied (Isa. 2:2–3):

In the last days
the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established
as chief among the mountains;
it will be raised above the hills,
and all nations will stream to it.
Many peoples will come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,

so that we may walk in his paths."
The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

The literal Mount Zion was never particularly conspicuous for its physical elevation. But here, as in Ezekiel 38–39, we are dealing with theological geography rather than literal geography. The new temple, which appears "like a city" (40:2), is located in the theologically opposite terrain to the dry bones of Ezekiel 37: Just as there the dead are raised to new life, so also here the valley has been exalted and transformed into a "city" on a hill.

There on the mountaintop Ezekiel is met by an angelic figure, who will be his tour guide around the temple. This is not his first visionary guided tour of a temple; in chapter 8 he received a similar tour of the defiled Jerusalem temple and all its abominations, conducted by a similar figure. That vision culminated in the departure of "the glory of the LORD" from the temple (10:18), just as the vision in chapters 40–42 culminates in the return of that glory to the new temple (43:1–5). The focus of the temple vision, then, is the reversal of the divine abandonment of God's people that had culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem.

The angel is equipped with a linen cord (which is not again mentioned) and a measuring rod, to enable him to measure the various parts of the temple (40:3). The linen cord was presumably marked off in multiples of the measuring rod, to enable the measurement of longer distances.⁵ This measuring process is intended for Ezekiel's benefit; he is instructed to look and hear, to pay attention to all that he is shown so that he can tell the house of Israel what he sees (40:4). In other words, the purpose of his vision is instructional: He will see things he can then relate to his contemporaries, which will have meaningful content for them (see 43:10–12).

It is highly significant that the first thing the prophet sees on his tour is a wall surrounding the whole temple area (40:5). Walls have as their purpose regulating and defining space; they are there to mark territory as "inside" or "outside" and to regulate access to the "inside" space. Nor is this wall a minor obstacle; it is some ten and a half feet tall and ten and a half feet thick, providing a solid dividing line between the "holy," the area of the temple itself, and the "profane," the area outside. The function of this wall as a wall of separation between these two realms is apparent from the fact

that the wall's height is mentioned, a dimension not provided for the other spaces. A wall depends on its height and thickness for its effectiveness in keeping people out, so these dimensions take on a particular importance.

If the wall is too thick to be broken and too high to be scaled, its effectiveness in restricting access will depend on its gates. But what gates this wall possesses! The three sides that permit access (there is no entry on the west side) are dominated by massive fortress-style gatehouses, almost forty-five feet wide and ninety feet deep (40:13, 15). The defensive nature of these gates is underlined by the fact that they have a portico or vestibule not on the outside, where one would expect it (and where it is on the inner gatehouses) but on the inside.

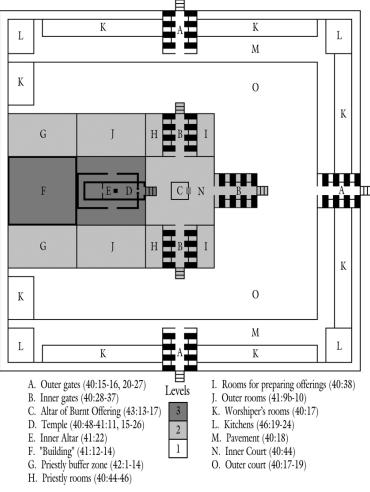


Figure 1. The Plan of Ezekiel's Temple

The gatehouses are further specified as having no fewer than six rooms for guards, three on each side. Similarly constructed gates have been excavated from the preexilic defenses of Megiddo, Hazor, and (probably) Gezer, though these gates were all smaller in scale than that which Ezekiel sees. To add to the sense of inaccessibility, there is a flight of seven steps to be climbed before the worshiper even reaches the gate (40:6, 22, 26). There is no doubt as to the initial impression that Ezekiel's temple is intended to have: It is a mighty fortress that clearly separates the sacred from the profane. §

The area of the outer court (O) is of little interest to the prophet or his angelic guide. It is passed over with a brief reference to a paved area (M) all around the court, with thirty rooms (K) opening off from it (40:17–19). These rooms are not sufficiently important to require definition of their measurements or purpose, though commentators have not been slow to fill in Ezekiel's silence. The single key measurement in the outer court is its breadth: one hundred cubits, or roughly 175 feet, from outer gateway to inner gateway (40:19). This substantial dimension is intended not so much to provide space for a massive throng of worshipers° as to provide a substantial buffer zone around the holy things in the inner courtyard.

The inner courtyard (N) itself is strongly separated off from the outer courtyard. It is defended by gates (B) exactly identical to those of the outer court, though with the portico on the outside rather than the inside (40:28–37). It is further elevated, probably by about eight feet, with the gates being approached by a flight of eight steps (40:31, 34, 37). There is no mention of a wall around the inner court. Some commentators have assumed that there must have been such a wall on the basis of the massive gatehouses controlling access to the inner court. However, K. Stevenson has pointed out that it was unnecessary to control access to the inner court by means of a wall because of its significantly higher elevation than the outer court. Absence of a wall would have allowed the worshipers there to view the ritual taking place at the altar of the inner court.

At this point, the prophet's progress inward is briefly halted, while his attention is drawn to the purpose of some of the spaces in the inner courtyard. There are rooms (I) beside the portico of each of the gates for washing the sacrifices (Ezek. 40:38),¹² while the porticoes themselves were used for slaughtering the sacrifices (40:39–43). The precise details

concerning the function of these rooms underline the fact already that the primary function of this temple is as a place of offering sacrifice. In the exilic and postexilic situation the need for a sacrifice to atone for the people's sins and enable them to stand in God's presence became a dominant theme. In contrast, key descriptions of Solomon's temple highlight its importance not only as the location for sacrifice but also as the center for prayer (1 Kings 8:28–54; Isa. 56:7).

In addition to these rooms, the prophet also sees two¹³ rooms for the Zadokite priests (H), who have overall responsibility for temple and altar (Ezek. 40:44–46). These Zadokites are further defined as "the only Levites who may draw near to the LORD to minister before him" (40:46). Thus the function of both sets of spaces specifically identified within the inner court serves the overall thrust of the vision: separating off access to a restricted space, which is reserved for the priests, so that proper sacrifices may be offered. Both ideas of holiness and sacrifice are present in the summary statement of 40:47. (1) The inner courtyard is a perfect square, a hundred cubits in each direction, for the square is the shape of the holy. (2) At its geometric center is the altar (C), the only piece of furniture noted in the courtyard, which is the place of sacrifice.

Having briefly described the outer and inner courts, Ezekiel is led on to the central feature of the new temple complex, the temple structure (D) itself (40:48; 41:26). Its importance is marked in three ways. (1) It is located as the protected center at the heart of the complex, with walls and zones of controlled access all around it. Although it is the most protected area of the sanctuary, doors are sufficient in place of gates to protect its sanctity, since only the priests have access to the inner court.

- (2) The temple building is conspicuous in its elevation, as the highest point of an edifice that is itself on top of the high mountain. It is reached by ascending ten steps (see NIV note on 40:49), whereas going up to the outer court only took seven steps and up to the inner court from the outer court a further eight steps.¹⁷
- (3) Its key significance is reflected in the extent and nature of the description accorded to the building. It is the space of the temple complex that is described in most detail and with the most precise measurements; even the "open area" around it is defined as being twenty cubits (thirty-five

feet) wide. The building itself and associated spaces make up another hundred-cubit square.¹⁸

The temple building is a tripartite structure, comprising portico, outer sanctuary, and inner sanctuary, whose architecture focuses attention on the inner sanctuary, that is, "the Most Holy Place" (41:4). This is the only square space within the temple building itself, and it is reached by passing through three openings of increasing narrowness. The door from the inner court into the portico is fourteen cubits (almost twenty-five feet) wide; the door from there into the outer sanctuary is ten cubits (seventeen feet) wide, while the door into the inner sanctuary is a mere six cubits (ten feet) wide. This design feature underlines the sanctity of the Most Holy Place,¹⁹ a sanctity so great (even before the return of God's glory!) that Ezekiel himself is not permitted to enter it. Instead, he remains outside, while the guiding angel goes in alone and measures it (41:3–4).

All around the temple building are no fewer than ninety rooms (J), on three levels (41:5–11), while behind the temple to the west there was a restricted area of twenty cubits breadth and a "building" (F) of unspecified purpose (41:10, 12). The rationale for this building may simply have been to protect the rear approach to the temple building; from now on no one would approach God "from behind," as it were.²⁰ Notice that no door or entranceway into the "building" is specified.

Returning to the description of the temple building itself, it is described as completely paneled with wood and decorated with images of palm trees and cherubim (Ezek. 41:17–18). This makes it more ornamented than the gates of the courtyards, which were simply adorned by palm trees (40:16). Palm trees were a common symbol of fertility and, along with cherubim, had been part of the decoration scheme of the first temple (1 Kings 6:29), which had also been wood-paneled. However, Ezekiel's decoration scheme is simpler than that of the first temple, which had a wide variety of other symbols carved on it, and the focus on the cherubim recalls the ominous presence of these enforcers of divine judgment in Ezekiel's opening vision.

The only piece of furniture mentioned within the temple building is an "altar" of wood in the outer sanctuary (E), which is designated "the table that is before the LORD" (Ezek. 41:22). This is presumably the table on which the "bread of the Presence" was laid out before the Lord (1 Kings 7:48). It is mentioned here because it will later be referred to as one of the

places at which the Zadokite priests have the privilege of ministering (Ezek. 44:16), a situation that is the necessary corollary of its location in the outer sanctuary, where only they had access.

Having described the temple building, Ezekiel is now headed outward once more in his description of the complex. His attention is first drawn to a series of rooms for the priests (G), located north and south of the unnamed building behind the temple. The details of the construction of these rooms are not entirely clear, but they are built on three levels and it appears that the priests could enter at the top from the inner court (42:12) and emerge from the bottom into the outer court (42:9). This serves to underline the status of the rooms as boundary areas for activities that, if not properly contained, might violate the gradation of holiness.²¹ These, therefore, are the rooms where the sacrifices and sacred offerings were to be consumed (42:13).

Eating these offerings was both a privilege and a responsibility. It was a *privilege* in that it was a means of providing for the physical needs of the priests, who as Levites had no land of their own to farm (44:28–30). But it was also a *responsibility*, since the consumption of the sin offerings was the required way of disposing of the low-grade contaminated material produced by the purification process. The carcass of the animal was regarded as having absorbed impurities during the sacrificial ritual, which were then dealt with by being ingested by the priest.²²

In addition to eating the sacred offerings here, the priests were also required to leave the sacred clothes in which they had ministered in these rooms (42:14), so that they might not bring that which was holy into dangerous contact with the profane. Both of these restrictions represent a significant raising of the differential between priest and nonpriest when they are compared with the perspective of the book of Leviticus.²³

Having completed his tour of the inner court, Ezekiel was brought back out to survey the temple from the outside. Its overall dimensions are square, five hundred cubits by five hundred cubits (42:16–20). It might seem only natural that a sacred building would adopt the most sacred shape, but once more the stakes have been raised from the arrangements of the Mosaic and Solomonic eras. In the tabernacle, for example, only the Most Holy Place is square; the other external spaces are increasingly nonsquare. In Ezekiel's

temple, however, the entire structure bears an increased level of sanctity that is expressed in its overall shape.

The final note on the layout of the temple brings us back to where we started, to the wall (42:20). This inclusion highlights the wall and its function: It serves "to separate the holy from the common" (42:20). Never again will the profane intrude on the realm of the holy as it did in the past. In the future, the lines will be clearly drawn. The walls must be clearly established, with a place for everyone and everyone in his or her place, so that the Lord can return to his place at the center of his people.

Bridging Contexts

THE ESSENCE OF Ezekiel's vision. Many commentators treat this portion of Ezekiel's prophecy as if it were the work of a harmless eccentric. Ezekiel, being a priest, was naturally interested in temples, just as some other people are interested in classical music, fly fishing, or motorcycles,²⁴ and so when it comes time to express his vision for the future, he lapses into what is for him the most accessible form of description. This is normally regarded as a somewhat regrettable choice on the priest-prophet's part, an unfortunate mode of self-expression. After all, who today is into temples?

The reader is thus frequently left with the distinct impression of the prophet as being at heart an earnest but dull bureaucrat, of the kind that in popular British mythology are associated with the European Community in Brussels. These faceless officials are believed to spend their time formulating endless petty regulations on how curved bananas are permitted to be or the maximum noise levels that may be emitted by domestic lawnmowers. True, there may possibly be some meaning and value to the work of these individuals, but precisely what that value is tends to escape us. In the same way, because this is part of sacred Scripture, commentators tend to affirm that there is meaning and value in this passage, but precisely what it is for ordinary people is frequently not clear.

Alternatively, on a dispensational interpretation, the significance of this detailed description of the temple building by the prophet is held to be self-evidently clear. These details form the necessary ground plan for the future millennial temple in Jerusalem. It is usually maintained that a competent architect could construct a building from Ezekiel's description.²⁵ This is

undoubtedly true, though the architect would have to use a consecrated imagination to supply the many details that are lacking, most notably the height dimensions and construction materials,²⁶ and the present temple site in Jerusalem would need to have its topography radically revised.²⁷ However, on this interpretation, it appears similarly inevitable that contemporary Christian believers, who will by then (*ex hypothesi*) have been raptured, can find little of edification here.

Neither approach, it seems to me, has captured the sense of what Ezekiel is trying to do in these chapters. What we have in Ezekiel 40–48 is nothing less than the visionary reordering of an entire new world, following on the creation of the new people of God in chapter 37 and the birth pangs of chapters 38–39.28 It is a view of heaven from halfway there, as the semi-Jubilee date indicates, showing a people living with the absence of God a vision of what his presence would be like. It is, in time-honored ancient Near Eastern tradition, a tour of the house that the divine warrior built on completion of his cosmic victory.29

Like the account of Genesis 1–11, this cosmogony revolves around the idea of separation and order, but this is significantly a new Eden without a fall. This is a paradise with walls,³⁰ to prevent new humankind from being driven from the presence of God (as in Gen. 3), or from driving God from their midst (as in Ezek. 8–11). Though the form may be unfamiliar to us, it is neither the nostalgic musings of a frustrated priest nor the precise notations of an inspired architect. It is a literary piece describing, in symbols drawn from temple categories, the brave new world of the future as a challenge and encouragement to God's people in Ezekiel's day and for us in the present (43:10–12).

A theology of Bible "worlds." Since Ezekiel 40–48 is a description of a new "temple-centered" world, in order to understand its significance we need to read it in the light of the other "worlds" the Bible describes. The first "world" was, of course, the world as originally created, a garden world without walls (Gen. 2). There was no fence there around the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil. There was only the fence of God's word, which said: "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (2:16–17). There was no sacrifice in that world, for there was no sin to be atoned for or impurity to be cleansed.

But then sin entered the world. The man and the woman were driven from the Garden of Eden, and the presence of God was closed off to them. All of humanity was placed on the outside because of sin, and they were barred from returning by the cherubim, though God promised that this state of alienation would not persist forever, for he would win back a people for himself (Gen. 3:15). It was at this time, after the Fall, that sacrifices began to be offered, though ironically the first sacrifice resulted in further sin and a further driving away from God's presence (4:11–12). The human race had started out on a path that would lead them ever further away from God, as the "progress" of Genesis 1–11 shows.

But with the world of Abraham, God began to reverse this trend. He called this patriarch out from his pagan roots and brought him into the land of promise, where God appeared to him. Abraham responded by setting up altars and offering sacrifices (Gen. 12). God promised to be his God and the God of his descendants after him (17:7). But God's presence with the patriarchs was spontaneous and sporadic. He appeared to them only briefly and intermittently. He did not live permanently with his people until after the exodus from Egypt. At Sinai he gave instructions for a tabernacle, a building with (flimsy) walls and regulations limiting access to protect his sanctity, so that he might live in the midst of his people. Now only the priests had access to the Holy Place and only the high priest to the Most Holy Place—and that only once a year. When the temple was built in Solomon's time, the flimsy walls were made permanent, and the rules of access were solidified.

By Ezekiel's day, however, all of that had broken down. The rules limiting access to God's presence had been flouted, allowing uncircumcised foreigners to penetrate the very heart of the temple (Ezek. 44:7). What is more, the wall of separation between the residence of the earthly king and the heavenly king had never been clearly drawn (43:8), so that the Jerusalem temple frequently functioned as if it were the private royal chapel under the control of the reigning king. To cap it all, the persistent idolatry of the people throughout the land had penetrated the sanctuary and totally defiled it (chs. 8–11). Simply returning to the old ways of doing things was not a possibility. Thus, Ezekiel was given a vision describing an entirely new kind of temple, a temple with radically raised walls, radically heightened standards of holiness, and a radical focus on sacrifice.

When the Jews returned from exile and rebuilt the temple, what they constructed did not resemble Ezekiel's ground plan. This was true not simply in terms of scale, where practical necessities would have been a hindrance. Even in terms of the regulations and perspectives that could easily have been adopted, Ezekiel's plan was not embraced by those who constructed the second temple.³¹ Should we therefore look to a future millennial temple in which to see these provisions of heightened sanctity fulfilled? I don't think so. Rather, we should do what it seems to me the New Testament does and see how the goal of Ezekiel's temple finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

Christ as the fulfillment of Ezekiel's temple. For Christ himself *is* the new temple. He is the dwelling of God among humankind, the glory of God made manifest (John 1:14). In one sense, with the incarnation of Jesus, the solid walls of the Old Testament temple have once again become flimsy material for the sake of portability, just as was the case with the tabernacle. Thus John states, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling [*eskenosen*, lit., tabernacled] among us" (John 1:14). But the walls needed to be flimsy not just for the sake of mobility but also so that they could be torn down in a final cataclysmic temple-cleansing, achieved through the breaking of his body on the cross. That was the "temple" of whose destruction Jesus spoke in John 2:19, when he said: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." There on the cross the radical focus on sacrifice of Ezekiel's temple found its full expression, as the new temple itself was made a complete sacrifice for sin, by which God's people were cleansed once and for all.

But in Christ the radical separation of the holy from the profane of Ezekiel's temple also found its fullest expression. Just as the temple of Ezekiel was in the midst of the people, yet was no longer able to be defiled by them, so also the Son of God lived in the midst of a sinful world, yet remained undefiled (Heb. 4:15). In him the light shone out clearly in the darkness, and the darkness could not in the least compromise it (John 1:5).

In addition, since the church is Christ's body, it is also the new temple. This means that we too as the church are called to share the radical focus on sacrifice of Ezekiel's temple. We do this not by reintroducing the physical sacrifices of the old order, which pointed forward to the coming of Christ, but by celebrating their fulfillment in the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ.

Our lives and our proclamation must center on the message of the cross: the reality of Jesus Christ crucified for us (1 Cor. 1:18–23). Reflecting the order of Ezekiel's temple, we too are called to recognize the difference between the holy and the profane, to separate ourselves from the sin that so easily besets us (Heb. 12:1) and the ties that improperly bind us to unbelievers, who keep us apart from God (2 Cor. 6:14–7:1).

There are, however, differences between our position as Christians and the arrangement of Ezekiel's temple. Most notably, the walls have been moved. While we are to build a wall of separation between ourselves and sin, and even in some situations between ourselves and sinners, now the walls between Christians have been torn down. Now there are no privileged classes of priests who have closer access to God, while ordinary Christians are stuck in the outer court. Now we are all part of a holy priesthood (1 Peter 2:5). Now the greatest wall of all, the wall separating Jew and Gentile, has been torn down. As they are incorporated into Christ, both are together on the inside of the new temple (Eph. 2:14–22).

These similarities and differences find striking focus in the new Jerusalem of Revelation 21, the final, eschatological "world" of biblical revelation. That this visionary "Holy City" is modeled on the temple of Ezekiel 40–48 is indisputable: John is carried away to a great and high mountain to see this city (Rev. 21:10), and he too is accompanied by an angel with a measuring rod (21:15). The city is square, with a great high wall around it and prominent gates, while a river of life flows from its center (22:1). All of these features come directly from Ezekiel 40–48. Yet the differences from Ezekiel's vision are equally striking. The city of Revelation has no temple (21:22), there are twelve gates around the perimeter (not three, as in Ezekiel's temple), and they stand perpetually wide open to the nations (21:12, 25).

What has John done with his predecessor's vision? He has shown how the same themes (separation of the holy from profane and sacrifice) look when they are viewed through the lens of fulfillment in Christ. There is still the same radical separation between the holy and the unholy on which Ezekiel insisted. The wall around Paradise has not been knocked down but has been raised even higher and made even thicker (Rev. 21:17). But now, in place of Ezekiel's multiplicity of walls, there is only one wall. The final separation has taken place between the righteous and the unrighteous. The

righteous—those "whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life" (21:27) and "who wash their robes" (22:14)—have completely free access through the gates of the city to its very heart, the tree of life before the throne of God (22:2, 14). The unrighteous, the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters, and all liars (21:8, 27; 22:15)—all of these are permanently on the outside (22:15).

The reason why there is no temple and no walls inside the city is because the entire city has become a giant Most Holy Place, a perfect cube in shape (Rev. 21:16) and covered with pure gold (21:18), just like the original tabernacle. The place to which no one had access in Ezekiel's temple, not even Ezekiel himself, is the place to which all Christians have access in the new Jerusalem. Unlike Ezekiel's temple, there is no altar in this "new world" because the sacrifice has been accomplished once and for all on the cross. The Lamb has been slain, and, risen from the dead, is at the heart of heavenly worship.

Thus, Ezekiel's temple points forward clearly and unequivocally to the salvation that God accomplished in Christ. Ezekiel's vision is not a heavenly construction plan that we are to establish on earth as part of a program of building the kingdom. Rather, the prophet saw something that already exists in heavenly form as a depiction of the kingdom that God himself is constantly engaged in building. This is not "spiritualizing" in the conventional sense of the word, whereby heavenly truths are deduced from earthly realities, but rather the reverse. Ezekiel's vision is precisely a vision of a heavenly truth that found its earthly realization in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. As Edmund Clowney put it: "It is not so much that Christ fulfills what the temple means; rather Christ is the meaning for which the temple existed." If this statement is true of the literal temple of the Old Testament, how much more for the symbolic temple of Ezekiel's vision: Christ is the meaning for which Ezekiel's vision exists.

Contemporary Significance

A NEW KIND of SOCIETY. In Robert Bly's new book, he argues that we have entered an entirely new kind of society in the 1990s, which he calls "the sibling society." We live in a world, he argues, where grown-ups act like

adolescents and adolescents see no reason to grow up. It is a society where hierarchical barriers are increasingly swept away in an across-the-board leveling-down process. Parents no longer hold authority over their children, husbands no longer hold authority over their wives, bosses no longer hold authority over their employees. Everyone is now leveled out into one great egalitarian mass.

One aspect of this change, functioning as both cause and effect, is the rise of day care and a distinct youth culture. Both of these modern innovations tend to move children from a network of relationships that revolve around home and family into a network of relationships that revolve around peers. The home with its historic authority structures and natural formative influence of the behavior of parents on their children has been replaced by the peer group. For better or worse, I am what I am largely because I copied or rebelled against the example of my parents. For many in the next generation, this will no longer be the case. One of the producers of *Melrose Place* put it like this:

This generation has the ability to socialize in packs. . . . At age two, they were taught to get along with others [in day care] and what it means to respect others and somebody's space. So they value those friendships more than family because they spend so much time with them. The people I know from that age group just love being in groups.³⁵

This societal change is reflected in the television shows created for them. It is no surprise that we have gone from the family-centered genre of shows like *Leave It to Beaver* and *The Brady Bunch* to the pack-centered genre of *Friends* and *Seinfeld*. We have moved from the old patriarchal society, with its inherent structures, into an amorphous sibling society.

Of course, not everything about this change is bad, as Bly recognizes. The old patriarchal structures in some cases permitted and even encouraged the abuse of wives, children, and employees. If you doubt that, just read a few nineteenth-century novels. In *Wuthering Heights*, for instance, there is a multigenerational pattern of systematic and public wife and child abuse, which would be barely conceivable in modern society. It is no loss that

there are laws to protect workers against bosses like Ebenezer Scrooge in Dicken's *A Christmas Carol*.

Nor was the old patriarchal society necessarily more "Christian" than the new sibling society. In the patriarchal society God was frequently conceived as distant and remote, so that for many people (in practice if not always blatantly proclaimed to be such) it could be said, "God is dead." In the 1990s no one except the old-fashioned proclaims the death of God. Instead, for the average non-Christian, God has been absorbed into myself—hence the rise in introspective spiritualities of self-awareness and self-realization. In both cases, however, God is still experienced as being absent. Because of sin and idolatry, there is no experience of the living presence of God in their lives or in their surroundings, and nothing else can ultimately fill that hole. Beauty can never be beautiful enough, relationships can never be strong enough, money can never make you rich enough, power can never be absolute enough; in all of us, in whatever kind of society we live, there is a deep-seated sense of loss and absence caused by the absence of God.

Responding to the "absence" of God. Ezekiel's visionary temple addresses the believer who lives in a world in which God seems absent. His answer is to lift the veil and show us the black-and-white realities of the world as it really is, the heavenly order of things. In this world there is a place for everything, and everything (and everyone) is in its place. In Ezekiel's vision, society has been reordered and transformed. But most significantly, it is a world where God is once more in his place, for the entire description of Ezekiel 40–42 leads up to the climactic reentry of the glory to the temple in chapter 43.

What does it mean for God not to be "in his place"? For the exiles, it meant a world that had fallen apart, a world that like Humpty-Dumpty had toppled off the wall, and all the king's horses and all the king's men could never simply put him back together again. God had packed his bags and left. God had abandoned them. The sky had fallen and they walked in thick darkness.

This is a description of reality that Ezekiel does not counter. Instead, he affirms that all this is true, but there is more. To the exiles who cry out in pain, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off" (37:11), he responds with a vision in which the bones are not merely dry, but *very* dry. To a people sick and tired of invaders, he reports the future approach of

the invader to end all invaders, Gog of Magog (chs. 38–39). But in each instance, as also in his description of the new temple, God is active to restore his people. The dry bones can yet live. The hordes of Gog will end up as mounds of corpses. The temple they had defiled can and will be restored.

But the future is not, and cannot be, simply the past rewritten. Instead, in the new order of things there will be high walls built around Paradise to keep the sins of the past from being rewritten. In an adapted symbolism, the cherubim are stationed again to keep the sinners out, aided by high walls and (human) guards. God's holiness will not, and must not, be compromised in any way. The new temple is supremely the place where sacrifices are offered to maintain the renewed covenant relationship between God and his people.

How is this encouraging for Ezekiel's hearers or for us? How is it good news to hear that there will now be a high wall between God and all who lack perfect holiness? The answer is that it is not good news—unless you have considered the unthinkable alternative: that God would no longer be present in the midst of his people *at all*. To those who knew that it was their total depravity and defilement of the temple that caused God to depart from them, even this limited presence was good news indeed.

Yet we who are in Christ have been given far more! We have direct access to the very throne of grace, where Jesus himself intercedes for us at the right hand of the Father (Heb. 4:16; 7:25; 8:1). There are no walls that keep us out of God's presence, not because we are more holy in ourselves than Ezekiel and his hearers but because we have been credited with the perfect righteousness of Christ in place of our filthy rags. His once-for-all sacrifice has effected the transition that turned us from aliens and strangers, without God and without hope in the world (Eph. 2:12), to insiders who are able to "approach . . . with confidence" (Heb. 4:16). Should we not therefore rejoice at the greatness of the salvation accomplished for us and strive to be pure, even as our Lord Jesus was pure?

But we should also remember that one wall still remains and that many are still outsiders to God's grace. Some live beyond the sound of gospel proclamation. Others have heard the gospel proclaimed over and over again, yet have repeatedly rejected it. Nothing and no one impure can ever enter God's heavenly holy city. Even the most moral person, if he or she

does not believe in Christ, is outside the wall; left to themselves, such people must perish utterly. Our calling as priests of the new temple is to teach these people too the one way to holiness through trusting in Christ, seeking to draw them into the new world we have been given, where Paradise once more stands open to God's people and the tree of life is freely accessible to all.

Ezekiel 43

THEN THE MAN brought me to the gate facing east, ²and I saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east. His voice was like the roar of rushing waters, and the land was radiant with his glory. ³The vision I saw was like the vision I had seen when he came to destroy the city and like the visions I had seen by the Kebar River, and I fell facedown. ⁴The glory of the LORD entered the temple through the gate facing east. ⁵Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple.

⁶While the man was standing beside me, I heard someone speaking to me from inside the temple. ⁷He said: "Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet. This is where I will live among the Israelites forever. The house of Israel will never again defile my holy name—neither they nor their kings—by their prostitution and the lifeless idols of their kings at their high places. ⁸When they placed their threshold next to my threshold and their doorposts beside my doorposts, with only a wall between me and them, they defiled my holy name by their detestable practices. So I destroyed them in my anger. ⁹Now let them put away from me their prostitution and the lifeless idols of their kings, and I will live among them forever.

¹⁰"Son of man, describe the temple to the people of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their sins. Let them consider the plan, ¹¹ and if they are ashamed of all they have done, make known to them the design of the temple—its arrangement, its exits and entrances—its whole design and all its regulations and laws. Write these down before them so that they

may be faithful to its design and follow all its regulations.

12"This is the law of the temple: All the surrounding area on top of the mountain will be most holy. Such is the law of the temple.

13"These are the measurements of the altar in long cubits, that cubit being a cubit and a handbreadth: Its gutter is a cubit deep and a cubit wide, with a rim of one span around the edge. And this is the height of the altar: ¹⁴From the gutter on the ground up to the lower ledge it is two cubits high and a cubit wide, and from the smaller ledge up to the larger ledge it is four cubits high and a cubit wide. ¹⁵The altar hearth is four cubits high, and four horns project upward from the hearth. ¹⁶The altar hearth is square, twelve cubits long and twelve cubits wide. ¹⁷The upper ledge also is square, fourteen cubits long and fourteen cubits wide, with a rim of half a cubit and a gutter of a cubit all around. The steps of the altar face east."

¹⁸Then he said to me, "Son of man, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: These will be the regulations for sacrificing burnt offerings and sprinkling blood upon the altar when it is built: ¹⁹You are to give a young bull as a sin offering to the priests, who are Levites, of the family of Zadok, who come near to minister before me, declares the Sovereign LORD. ²⁰You are to take some of its blood and put it on the four horns of the altar and on the four corners of the upper ledge and all around the rim, and so purify the altar and make atonement for it. ²¹You are to take the bull for the sin offering and burn it in the designated part of the temple area outside the sanctuary.

²²"On the second day you are to offer a male goat without defect for a sin offering, and the altar is to

be purified as it was purified with the bull. ²³When you have finished purifying it, you are to offer a young bull and a ram from the flock, both without defect. ²⁴You are to offer them before the LORD, and the priests are to sprinkle salt on them and sacrifice them as a burnt offering to the LORD.

²⁵"For seven days you are to provide a male goat daily for a sin offering; you are also to provide a young bull and a ram from the flock, both without defect. ²⁶For seven days they are to make atonement for the altar and cleanse it; thus they will dedicate it. ²⁷At the end of these days, from the eighth day on, the priests are to present your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings on the altar. Then I will accept you, declares the Sovereign LORD."

Original Meaning

WE NOTED IN the previous section the similarities between the world-constructing vision of Ezekiel 40–48 and Genesis 1–2. A further similarity emerges in Ezekiel 43–46 as the account of the formation of the different spaces in chapters 40–42 is followed by an account of their filling, just as the spaces formed in days 1–3 of Genesis 1 were subsequently filled in days 4–6. An empty temple is, by itself, worthless; it was made to be occupied. The logic of the description starts from the center with the filling of the Most Holy Place (Ezek. 43:1–9) and ends at the corners of the outer court, with the description of the activities in the kitchens (46:24).

The return of the glory of the Lord to the new temple is the high point of chapters 43–46. This return, which reverses the abandonment of the temple and its destruction described in equally visionary form in chapters 8–11, is the fulfillment of the central promise of restoration: the Lord dwelling in the midst of his people forever (37:26–28). The connection with the previous visions is made explicit in 43:3: "The vision I saw was like the vision I had seen when he came to destroy the city and like the visions I had seen by the Kebar River."

The glory returns to the temple through the east gate, from the same direction in which it had earlier left (Ezek. 10:18–19).² Whereas its departure was slow and halting, however, its return is rapid and direct. On its return, the glory of God not only fills the temple, as it had filled the Solomonic temple at its consecration (1 Kings 8:10–11), it even causes the land itself to shine (Ezek. 43:2). As with the other visions, the prophet's response to the revelation of God's glory is to fall on his face (43:3b).

The overwhelmed prophet is once again picked up by the Spirit and dropped in the inner court, in order for him to hear the word of the Lord (43:5). That word is an assertion of the Lord's kingship and of his "liv[ing] among the Israelites forever" (43:7). As King, the Lord is marking out his territorial claim to the areas defined in the vision, with the new temple as his throne room and footstool.³ But what is new is not the Lord's claim to kingship or the area over which he makes that claim, it is the assertion that his kingship will be exercised there *forever*.

In order to ensure that his reigning presence remains with his people forever, it is necessary to guard against any repetition of the abuses of the past. This involves once more redefining the nature of the areas around the divine throne room and limiting access that might endanger their sacredness. In the past, the house of Israel and their kings had defiled the Lord's name by their prostitution (i.e., their spiritual adultery with the gods of other nations, as in ch. 23) and by setting up memorial stelae⁴ to their monarchs within the temple grounds (43:7–8).⁵

There is no room for these stelae in honor of the human king in the place dedicated to the worship of the divine King. Henceforth they will be banished. Indeed, the whole former social geography of the temple mount, where the house of the divine King was merely a (smaller) neighboring residence to the palace of the human king, will be swept away. Because the former kings defiled the Lord's name by their detestable practices, their position in the future kingdom will be further removed from the center.⁶ This is a necessary precondition for the Lord's perpetual dwelling in the midst of his people (43:9).

Verses 10–12 sum up the rationale for the temple vision: Ezekiel is being shown these things so that he can relay them to his own generation. They must consider the design and "be ashamed of their [former] sins." The temple vision is not a building plan or a prediction of the future but rather a

powerful symbol that addresses the people in Ezekiel's day. What specifically about the temple design is to move them to shame? They must consider in particular its "plan" (43:10), its "arrangement," its "exits and entrances," along with its "regulations and laws" (43:11). In other words, the temple vision is a pedagogical tool that speaks by its shape and size, and particularly by its permission or denial of access ("exits and entrances"). These regulations all serve a single overriding purpose: that the whole area all around the temple may be most holy. In order for God to continue to live in their midst forever, regard for his holiness must govern not simply access to the Most Holy Place, but the entire temple mount (43:12).

Removal of sinners to a safe distance is only one aspect of maintaining the holiness of the temple area; the other, more positive, aspect is through the reestablishment of the sacrificial system. For this reason, Ezekiel's attention is now drawn once more to the altar in the inner court, the central piece of furniture mentioned in the earlier tour. The importance of this altar to Ezekiel's plan is evident not merely from its detailed description but also from its place at the geometric center of the temple complex. The contrast is made clearer by the fact that in the tabernacle the altar was the least sacred of the cultic articles, located in the outer court; its geometric center pointed rather to the ark.⁸ Once more this represents an overall raising of the standards of holiness compared to the old ways, assigning the altar an equal sanctity to the furnishings of the Most Holy Place.

The nature of this altar is a three-or four-layer square construction, depending on whether the $h\hat{e}q$ (v. 13) is interpreted as a "gutter" (NIV) or a "base" (NRSV). The dimensions of the altar are 18 cubits by 18 cubits (31.5 feet square) at the lowest level and 14 cubits by 14 cubits (24.5 feet square) at the highest (43:13–17). At each corner of the top level there are projections, or "horns," to which blood is applied during some aspects of the ritual (43:20). The whole edifice stands nine cubits (about fifteen feet) high and is approached by a flight of steps from the east. This is a reversal of the normal ancient Near Eastern practice whereby the priest faces east when offering sacrifices. In Ezekiel's temple the priest faces west, toward the Most Holy Place, thus avoiding any suggestion of a repetition of the sun worship of 8:16, the crowning abomination of the earlier temple vision.

Having described the new altar, Ezekiel is then given instructions for the eight-day purification process that fits the altar for sacred use (43:19–27).

He himself is assigned a key role in this consecration process, just as Moses had instituted the cult given on Mount Sinai. On the first day he is to offer an unblemished bull as a purification offering (haṭṭāʾt), while on days 2–8 he is to offer a male goat as a purification offering and a bull and a ram as burnt offerings. The blood of the purification offerings is to be applied to the altar at the topmost extremities (the four horns), the lowest extremities (all around the rim), and four middle extremities (the four corners of the upper ledge, 43:20).

Zimmerli notes a parallel between this procedure and the ordination of Aaron and his sons to the priesthood, in which blood is smeared on the right ear, the thumb of the right hand, and the big toe of the right foot (Lev. 8:22–23). The body of the purification sacrifice is then disposed of by burning it outside the sanctuary. The burnt offerings are also to be offered with salt (Ezek. 43:24). Salt was the preservative par excellence in the ancient Near East and seems to have featured prominently in covenant ceremonies. Although it is elsewhere only specifically required in the regulations for the cereal offering (Lev. 2:13), it may well have formed part of all of the offerings made by fire.

The purpose of this ritual with the repeated presentation of purification offerings is to "purify the altar and make atonement [kipper] for it," so that the holy space can be used for the regular ministry of offering sacrifices (Ezek. 43:20). The concept of making atonement (or expiation) expresses the idea of ritually wiping away the impurities and sins that adhere to a person or object. Israel's past sins have penetrated even to this heavenly sanctuary and must be cleansed before the work of the cult can be restarted. Without a spiritual spring cleaning of the altar, none of the offerings made on it will be acceptable to God. Once Ezekiel has completed his inaugural ministry, assisted by the Zadokite priests (43:19), the priests will be able to carry out their task of offering burnt offerings and fellowship offerings on the altar, the ongoing means of assuring God's blessing on his people. They will once more be acceptable to God (43:27).

Bridging Contexts

PRECONDITIONS FOR THE return of God's glory. The glory of God is an intangible concept for most contemporary Christians. We may pray for God

to be glorified in us and in the world, but the idea of glory tends to be somewhat ethereal. In contrast, in the Old Testament the glory of God was a substantial, even tangible, presence. When Moses went up on Mount Sinai, he had an encounter with God's glory that made his face radiant (Ex. 33:18–23; 34:29–30). At the completion of the tabernacle, the glory filled it to such an extent that even Moses could not enter (40:34–35). When Solomon finished constructing his temple and dedicated it, God's response was to descend in glory to fill it (1 Kings 8:11). In Old Testament times, God's glory was the visible manifestation of his presence in the midst of his people. Thus Isaiah's vision of the glory of God filling the temple (Isa. 6) forms the basis for his confident assertion in the following chapter of "God with us" ("Immanuel," Isa. 7:14; 8:8).

But the immanent presence of God with us is not necessarily good news for sinners. That is why Isaiah fell on his face, proclaiming the covenant curse on himself: "Woe to me! . . . I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty" (Isa. 6:5). He was afraid that the vision of God's glory would not merely make his face shine but would incinerate him. In Isaiah's case, the solution to his needs was at hand in a fully functional altar, from which the seraph brought a live coal to touch his lips and purify him of his sins (Isa. 6:7).

In Ezekiel's vision, although the fundamental concepts are similar, the situation is more complex. The danger with which he is concerned is not so much the presence of God as the absence of God. Though the wrathful presence of God had already led to the destruction of Jerusalem for her sins, the permanent absence of God is an equally fearful prospect. Without the presence of God at the center of the life of the community, there can be no life. There will simply be a collection of dry bones. Ezekiel's vision of the return of God's glory is the theological prerequisite for the restoration of the people, just as surely as his vision of the departure of God's glory from the Jerusalem temple was a theological prerequisite for its destruction. It is a statement that the Lord is still King—an issue addressed in his victory over the nations in Ezekiel 38–39. Specifically, the Lord is King over Israel and will continue to be their King forever. Never again will they experience total abandonment, the absence of God.

Just as God cannot speak through a prophet with unclean lips, however, but must first cleanse them (Isa. 6:7), so he cannot dwell in an unpurified house. The altar is as necessary in Ezekiel 43 as it was in Isaiah 6. But whereas in Isaiah 6 the prophet saw a fully functional heavenly cult that merely needed to be applied to his condition, in Ezekiel the heavenly cult itself is in abeyance and needs to be reconstituted. In Ezekiel, it is not just the prophet who needs to be cleansed; the heavenly altar itself has been defiled by the sins of the people and needs to be ritually purified before true worship can begin once again.¹⁴

This is a task in which Ezekiel is called to share. Having been faithful in his commission as a watchman in the earlier part of the book, his reward is access to the heavenly altar and a key role in the reinauguration of heavenly worship. It is as if the worship of heaven itself has been halted while God's people are in exile and Jerusalem is in ruins. But now, the vision depicts the resumption of heaven's worship, which carries with it the assurance of a new era in the earthly worship of God's people.

Jesus and God's glory. The testimony of the New Testament is that the new era has dawned in the coming of Jesus Christ. The glories of heaven, depicted in shadowy forms throughout the Old Testament, have now broken into history. Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise of Immanuel; in him, God is with us (Matt. 1:23). In Jesus, the glory of the high and holy God has come and lived in our midst, just as Ezekiel foresaw. As the apostle John testifies, "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory" (John 1:14). In the language of the writer to the Hebrews, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being (Heb. 1:3). The first of Jesus' miracles, in which he turned water into wine, was not merely an exercise in fulfilling the felt needs of those around him; it was nothing less than a display of his glory (John 2:11).

In general, Christ's glory was veiled even from his closest associates, but on the Mount of Transfiguration the veil was taken away for a moment and the three disciples beheld his radiant presence (Matt. 17:2). On the first Palm Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem in kingly triumph—from the east!—and then entered the temple. There he exercised his royal authority over it by throwing out the merchants and the money changers (Matt. 21:1–13).

But in order for his presence with sinful humanity to be for their blessing and not judgment, before his work was complete, Jesus had to offer the perfect sacrifice on the cross. The purpose of this sacrifice was to provide the cleansing blood that might be applied not only to sinners, but also to the heavenly sanctuary itself so that it might be purified (Heb. 9:23). From the perspective of the writer of Hebrews, Jesus is the one who fulfills the prophet's actions in purifying the heavenly altar, only he does his work not with the blood of bulls and goats but with his own blood (9:12). That oncefor-all sacrifice is fully efficacious; it does not merely cleanse the sanctuary so that the endless round of animal sacrifices may begin again; rather, it brings that endless round to a final stop (10:11–12).

This is a sacrifice with power beyond the wildest dreams of the Old Testament prophet. Yet it is a sacrifice that brings about precisely what Ezekiel envisages, for now we may have confidence in God's lasting presence with us forever. Indeed, having sent them out to accomplish the task of proclaiming his lordship over all nations, Jesus' final words to his disciples are these: "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

Contemporary Significance

Contemporary understandings of God. The modern world believes increasingly in a God who is not there. Though the opinion polls repeatedly demonstrate that a high proportion of people in the West still "believe in God," the nature of that God has shifted dramatically. In place of the old certainties of a transcendent God, people have come to believe more in an immanent God, a God who is not "there" any more than he (or she) is "here." God is now perceived more as a universal life force than as a personality. The heart of such a creed is expressed in the familiar benediction from the *Star Wars* films: "May the Force be with you."

One of the consequences of that societal shift is a loss of belief in moral absolutes and a correlative absence of any sense of guilt over personal wrongdoing. If God is not outside me, then there is no basis for a morality outside me. Whereas the "modern" generation sought empowerment to live lives that were "good" according to some objective standard, the "postmodern" generation seeks freedom to follow whatever personal whim

drives them. Although the postmodern generation might not find the music to its taste, their attitude is admirably summed up in the lyric from *The Sound of Music*: "Climb every mountain; ford every stream; follow every byway; 'til you find your dream." The idea that God is absent from us because of our sin and cannot be found by us no matter how diligently we search is alien to our contemporaries.

In contrast to the vague pantheism of so much postmodernism, Christians believe in "the God who is there," in Francis Schaeffer's classic phrase. ¹⁶ A life lived without reference to this God is a life lived without its center. He is the mountain peak for which all climbers are unwittingly looking, the country on the other side that the forders seek, the goal in search of which those wandering the byways travel, the reality behind every dream. This, however, does *not* mean that "all roads lead to God." Far from it; because of sin, the most accessible and well-traveled roads lead away from God (Matt. 7:14). Left to ourselves, the natural result of all of our searching is futile thinking and darkened hearts. By nature, we continually suppress the truth, exchanging God's glory for diverse idolatries (Rom. 1:21–23).

However, the truth of God's existence does mean that we can proclaim to the restless wanderers of the postmodern generation that there is rest and real freedom to be found only in Christ. God is neither dead nor absent, nor is he silent. He is there and constantly speaking to us, addressing us through the glories of creation and the powerful proclamation of his Word (Ps. 19). As creatures we were made to serve somebody, and we cannot escape that destiny. Whatever we value in this world becomes our idol and master, even the pursuit of freedom and liberty itself. True freedom and true fulfillment come ironically only as we submit ourselves to the One we were made to serve. As John Donne put it:

Take me to you, imprison me, for I, Except you enthrall me, never shall be free, Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.¹⁷

Approaching the God who is there. But if God is objectively there, if his Word is objectively true, and if life may only be found through his presence in our hearts, then the question of how we may approach such a God becomes pressing. Here the need of the postmodern person is the same as

the modern, the notorious sinner the same as the righteous-living Pharisee, for "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). All have sinned, and the least sin is sufficient to drive away the life-giving presence of the only true God. How then can we stand in his presence? The only way is to come to the altar. If God is to dwell in our hearts, those hearts must first be cleansed by him. We need the blood of purification applied to our hearts and lives by Jesus Christ, wiping away our sin.

It is that blood that cleanses us of all unrighteousness, making our hearts fit places for God to indwell. It is that blood that is at work in our lives, erecting a wall between us and sin so that sin will not have dominion over us (Rom. 6:14). To be sure, that wall is not yet complete in this life, as we might wish. Sin remains ever with us, our constant unwelcome companion. But the assurance of the new temple is that if Christ has entered our hearts and begun the good work of purification, he will not stop until the wall between us and sin is higher and more effective than that which Ezekiel saw in his new temple.

But when Christ comes into our lives, he does so in only one role: as King. One of the problems that existed in Judah was a confusion over who was really sovereign, a confusion that demonstrated itself in the proliferation of memorial stelae glorifying earthly kings in a building intended to glorify the heavenly King. That may seem an alien problem to us until we start to examine our own hearts and ask how much of our lives are lived to our own glory and how much to God's glory. Who is really sovereign in your decision-making? Who calls the shots in how you spend your money and your time? Who is Lord in how you arrange your priorities? Who occupies the center of your thoughts? All of a sudden, the questions strike closer to home. Although we may confess with our mouths that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, all too often our lives tell a different story.

We can also ask the same question of our churches. Who is really being glorified in what goes on in our worship services? How many of our songs and hymns focus on ourselves, on how good knowing God makes us feel? How many, on the other hand, exalt him for who he is and for what he has done for us in Christ? How often do we emerge from a service more impressed by the skills of the preacher, the musicians, or the soloist than we are overwhelmed by the grace and glory of God? How much of our

church's activities are focused on bringing glory to God, compared to how much time, effort, and money are focused on meeting our various needs?

I suspect that we too have our memorial stelae that need to be swept away, if we wish to experience the Spirit of God powerfully at work in our midst. We too have domesticated the church of God, turning it from his kingdom into a little extension of our own kingdoms. But God will live in our midst only as the King, nothing less.

Ezekiel 44

THEN THE MAN brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary, the one facing east, and it was shut.

The LORD said to me, "This gate is to remain shut. It must not be opened; no one may enter through it. It is to remain shut because the LORD, the God of Israel, has entered through it. The prince himself is the only one who may sit inside the gateway to eat in the presence of the LORD. He is to enter by way of the portico of the gateway and go out the same way."

⁴Then the man brought me by way of the north gate to the front of the temple. I looked and saw the glory of the LORD filling the temple of the LORD, and I fell facedown.

⁵The LORD said to me, "Son of man, look carefully, listen closely and give attention to everything I tell you concerning all the regulations regarding the temple of the LORD. Give attention to the entrance of the temple and all the exits of the sanctuary. ⁶Say to the rebellious house of Israel, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Enough of your detestable practices, O house of Israel! ⁷In addition to all your other detestable practices, you brought foreigners uncircumcised in heart and flesh into my sanctuary, desecrating my temple while you offered me food, fat and blood, and you broke my covenant. 8Instead of carrying out your duty in regard to my holy things, you put others in charge of my sanctuary. ⁹This is what the Sovereign LORD says: No foreigner uncircumcised in heart and flesh is to enter my sanctuary, not even the foreigners who live among the Israelites.

10% 'The Levites who went far from me when Israel went astray and who wandered from me after

their idols must bear the consequences of their sin. ¹¹They may serve in my sanctuary, having charge of the gates of the temple and serving in it; they may slaughter the burnt offerings and sacrifices for the people and stand before the people and serve them. ¹²But because they served them in the presence of their idols and made the house of Israel fall into sin, therefore I have sworn with uplifted hand that they must bear the consequences of their sin, declares the Sovereign LORD. ¹³They are not to come near to serve me as priests or come near any of my holy things or my most holy offerings; they must bear the shame of their detestable practices. ¹⁴Yet I will put them in charge of the duties of the temple and all the work that is to be done in it.

15" 'But the priests, who are Levites and descendants of Zadok and who faithfully carried out the duties of my sanctuary when the Israelites went astray from me, are to come near to minister before me; they are to stand before me to offer sacrifices of fat and blood, declares the Sovereign LORD. ¹⁶They alone are to enter my sanctuary; they alone are to come near my table to minister before me and perform my service.

17" 'When they enter the gates of the inner court, they are to wear linen clothes; they must not wear any woolen garment while ministering at the gates of the inner court or inside the temple. ¹⁸They are to wear linen turbans on their heads and linen undergarments around their waists. They must not wear anything that makes them perspire. ¹⁹When they go out into the outer court where the people are, they are to take off the clothes they have been ministering in and are to leave them in the sacred rooms, and put on other clothes, so that they do not consecrate the people by means of their garments.

²⁰" 'They must not shave their heads or let their hair grow long, but they are to keep the hair of their heads trimmed. ²¹No priest is to drink wine when he enters the inner court. ²²They must not marry widows or divorced women; they may marry only virgins of Israelite descent or widows of priests. ²³They are to teach my people the difference between the holy and the common and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and the clean.

²⁴" 'In any dispute, the priests are to serve as judges and decide it according to my ordinances. They are to keep my laws and my decrees for all my appointed feasts, and they are to keep my Sabbaths holy.

²⁵" 'A priest must not defile himself by going near a dead person; however, if the dead person was his father or mother, son or daughter, brother or unmarried sister, then he may defile himself. ²⁶After he is cleansed, he must wait seven days. ²⁷On the day he goes into the inner court of the sanctuary to minister in the sanctuary, he is to offer a sin offering for himself, declares the Sovereign LORD.

²⁸" 'I am to be the only inheritance the priests have. You are to give them no possession in Israel; I will be their possession. ²⁹They will eat the grain offerings, the sin offerings and the guilt offerings; and everything in Israel devoted to the LORD will belong to them. ³⁰The best of all the firstfruits and of all your special gifts will belong to the priests. You are to give them the first portion of your ground meal so that a blessing may rest on your household. ³¹The priests must not eat anything, bird or animal, found dead or torn by wild animals.

Original Meaning

Following on the description of the return of the glory of the Lord to fill the central space of the temple, Ezekiel 44 continues the process of the filling of the various spaces described in chapters 40–42. No one is allowed access to the Most Holy Place itself, but who may be permitted to enter into the inner court of this holy God? The question of access to God is, of course, not a new one in Ezekiel's day. The tabernacle had strict regulations governing access to the different areas, as had Mount Sinai itself before that (Ex. 24). What is new about Ezekiel's vision, however, is that the rules of access are tighter than those of the tabernacle, and the basis for those rules is now bound up in the past obedience of the parties concerned. Those who have proved themselves obedient are rewarded with the closest access to the center, while those who have strayed are allowed only a more limited access. It is the outworking in visionary, graded form of the question and answer of Psalm 24:3–4:

Who may ascend the hill of the LORD?
Who may stand in his holy place?
He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to an idol
or swear by what is false.

This section begins with an absolute prohibition of access: the outer east gate is closed and will forever remain closed (Ezek. 44:1–2). Because the Lord entered through it on his return to the Most Holy Place, it has acquired a special sanctity and may not be used by anyone else. However, the space within the gate may be used by the prince for his sacral meals before the Lord. When he does so, he is to enter this space from the outer court, not from outside the temple complex, in order that the outer gate may remain perpetually closed (44:3).

In this way, both the privilege and restriction of the prince's position is emphasized. On the one hand, he holds a unique position among the laity with special privileges, including access to a private room in part of the central east-west spine of the new temple, an especially holy location.⁴ On the other hand, this room is in the outer part of that region, and the prince has no access to the inner court. Thus, compared to the past, when the kings

frequently treated the sanctuary as a royal chapel, as if it were their own preserve in which they might establish whatever innovations they wished (e.g., 2 Kings 16:10–18), in future the royal figure has a limited, though still honorable, position.

That the concern of this section is with access—or, to use the language of the passage, "exits and entrances" (Ezek. 43:11)—is further underlined by the brief recapitulation in 44:4–5. Ezekiel sees again the glory of the Lord filling the temple and is thereupon instructed to pay attention to the statutes of the house of the Lord and its laws concerning entrance to the house and its exits. The continued presence of God is contingent on the proper control of access to these areas.

It was a failure to control access in the past that leads to the condemnation of the house of Israel in 44:6. Since Wellhausen used this passage as the heart of his reconstruction of the history of Israelite religion, it has been common to see this passage as a tendentious program aimed at downgrading the Levites from priestly status to that of temple servants.⁵ However, it is important to note that the prime target of accusation is the house of Israel as a whole; they (i.e., the laity) are primarily to blame and are therefore the ones who are "downgraded." The Levites are involved only secondarily and therefore receive only a partial exclusion.⁶

The sin of the past lay in bringing "foreigners uncircumcised in heart and flesh into my sanctuary, desecrating my temple" (44:7). This probably refers to the well-attested practice of employing foreign guards in the temple (2 Kings 11:14–19). The people failed in "carrying out [their] duty in regard to my holy things" (*šemartem mišmeret qodāšāy*, Ezek. 44:8); instead, they assigned that charge to others. This view is confirmed by the observation that in temple or tabernacle contexts *šāmar mišmeret* is virtually synonymous with the task of guarding the holy things (Lev. 8:35; 2 Kings 11:5).7 This sin will be repeated no more; uncircumcised foreigners will have no right of access into the sanctuary (Ezek. 44:9).

Unfortunately, the NIV, like most English translations, obscures the flow of thought in the passage by placing a paragraph break after 44:9, as if verse 10 introduces a new subject. In fact, verse 10 continues the thought of what precedes by identifying the legitimate temple guards, the Levites. The flow of the main train of thought is as follows: The foreigners will not enter the

sanctuary (v. 9), but the Levites will (v. 10); they will be in my sanctuary serving as armed guards at the gates of the house (v. 11).

To be sure, the Levites are not exonerated from blame; they served the people in the presence of their idols and must bear the consequences of their sin (44:10). Because they are tainted with the corruption of the preexilic sins of the people, they may not enter the inner court, serve as priests, or have any contact with the sacred offerings (44:13). But their ministry is extended rather than restricted when compared with the preexilic situation. Now they must slaughter the burnt offerings and sacrifices on behalf of the people (44:11), something the people had previously done for themselves.⁹

Once again the walls of separation have been raised in Ezekiel's temple in comparison to the preexilic situation. The sin of the Levites, whatever its precise form, has consequences in terms of restriction on access and service. The greater sin of the people has even greater consequences in more strictly regulated access to the sanctuary and its service. The purpose of these regulations is to induce shame in the hearers as they consider their detestable practices (44:13), yet it is a shame mixed with an appreciation of grace, for the sinners have not been excluded utterly from the presence of the holy God, as their sins deserved.

In contrast to the Levites and the people, whose access is restricted because of their sin, the Zadokite priests receive the privilege of sole access to the inner court and the offering of all sacrifices at the altar and the service at the table inside the sanctuary itself (44:15–16). This privilege is explained as being due to their faithful service in the time of Israel's apostasy (44:15). This is not because the narrator in Ezekiel 44 is unaware of the criticisms aimed at the priesthood in 22:26. In fact, it is precisely these sins that he insists will be done away with in the future, when the priests observe God's law and keep his Sabbaths holy (44:24). The righteousness of the Zadokites is relative, not absolute, just as their access is relative: They are permitted to go closer to the inner sanctum than anyone else, but even they are not allowed to enter the Most Holy Place, not even for the annual Day of Atonement ceremony. Just as sin has spatial consequences of restricted access in Ezekiel's vision of the future, so also righteousness brings with it the spatial rewards of greater access.

But greater access into the realm of the holy carries with it also greater responsibilities and limitations. Because the Zadokite priests penetrate

closer to the Most Holy Place than any others, they face additional restrictions on their behavior (44:17–27). They must wear linen rather than woolen clothing when they minister so that they do not defile the inner court with their sweat (44:17–18). Sweat may have been undesirable because it was regarded as belonging to the general category of bodily emissions that rendered one unclean (Deut. 23:9–14). Moreover, they are to distinguish between the "sacred" clothes they wear for ministry and the "other [profane] clothes" they wear for the rest of life. The former are to remain within the inner court, housed in the special rooms described in Ezekiel 42:13–14, so that holiness might not be accidentally transmitted to the people (44:19).

In Israelite law, holiness was not dangerous by itself. It was dangerous only to one who was contaminated with impurity or who acted in contravention of its laws.¹⁴ Therefore the priest, who daily handled the holy things, had to take special care with regard to his ritual cleanliness and actions. The fate of Nadab and Abihu stood as a solemn warning of the dangers attending the ministry of serving a holy God (Lev. 10:1–3). Of particular danger was the contamination associated with contact with the realm of death, either through contact with a corpse (Ezek. 44:25) or through the ritual mourning practices of shaving or loosing the hair of the head (44:20).¹⁵ The possibility of potentially fatal errors induced by the consumption of alcoholic beverages is also taken into account (44:21).¹⁶

The need for pure priestly stock, which flows from restricting access to the descendants of the seed of Zadok, is present in the restriction of priestly marriage to unmarried Israelite women or to the widows of priests (44:22). That provision assured that no offspring conceived by a former husband of a different tribe would be accidentally assumed to be of priestly stock.¹⁷ In all these ways, the priests are to be living models of what they teach—that there is a difference between holy and profane, between clean and unclean (44:23).

Since the priests belong to the Lord, they are to have the Lord as their inheritance alone (44:28). Unlike the other tribes, they are to be allotted no territory of their own in the new Promised Land. Instead, they are to be provided for through the sacrificial system. They are to eat the grain offering, the sin and guilt offerings, and all the things vowed to the Lord that cannot be redeemed (as in Lev. 27:28), along with all "the firstfruits"

and the "special gifts" (lit., "the sacred contribution from all your sacred contributions," Ezek. 44:30). This last item seems to be related to the "tithe of the tithe," which the Levites are instructed to pass on to the priests in Numbers 18:25–29 (see RSV). This "holy food" from the life-giving altar and the gifts of God's people is to be their sustenance. Birds or animals found dead or torn by wild animals are not to be eaten, however (Ezek. 44:31).

Throughout this chapter, the concern over the holiness of those having access to the central regions of the sanctuary is evident. Those who enter the inner parts of the sanctuary to minister in God's service must have a past history of faithfulness and must continue to walk in the ways of the holy, lest they be destroyed in an instant by the holy God whom they serve.

Bridging Contexts

THE CONCERN FOR and protection of the holy. In ancient Israel, as elsewhere in the ancient Near East, a sanctuary was not a place to be entered lightly and unthinkingly. Rather, the sanctuary was seen as a danger zone, somewhat comparable to a nuclear power plant. In a nuclear power station, strict precautions have to be taken because of the special dangers of radioactivity, which can cause catastrophic effects if it is handled carelessly. Access to some areas of the site is strictly limited, and special clothing has to be worn for some processes to prevent lethal contact between those operating the plant and the radioactive material, and to prevent radioactivity being transmitted by them to the outside world. In an analogous way, the priests had to take special care in their dress and their conduct to avoid danger to themselves and to prevent dangerous levels of holiness being brought into contact with the general public.

Nowhere is this caution more evident than in Ezekiel's vision. This is hardly surprising, given Ezekiel's own experience of seeing the Jerusalem temple defiled and subsequently destroyed by God's holy wrath. Anyone who personally witnessed the carnage caused by the meltdown at the Chernobyl nuclear power station would understandably be concerned to tighten up regulations to guard against its repetition. In precisely the same way, Ezekiel's vision represents a tightening of the "holiness code of practice," a raising of the walls and reinforcing the steel of the containment

chamber around the temple. Ezekiel is all too aware of something distant from our contemporary thinking: that it is a fearful thing for sinners to fall into the hands of the all-holy God.

But since we are all sinners, who among us can enter the inner court as a reward for our faithfulness? Who has a "righteousness" great enough to stand in God's presence? As Christians, our natural answer, in terms of the New Testament terminology, is "no one." As Romans 3:23 puts it: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." How then do we explain the "righteousness" of the Zadokites, on the strength of which they are granted access and privileges not granted to others? The answer lies in an understanding of the ancient Near Eastern treaty form known as a "covenant of grant."¹⁸

In this type of treaty, known from Hittite and Akkadian sources as well as in biblical parallels, the faithfulness and loyalty of the ancestor secures the rights of all of his subsequent descendants. Unlike suzerainty treaties, where the covenant acts as a motivation to each generation to show loyalty, a covenant of grant is a simple reward for past loyalty. This loyalty is typically described in the terminology of having walked before the Lord (Gen. 17:1; 24:40; 1 Kings 8:25; 9:4; Isa. 38:3), of having a perfect heart (1 Chron. 28:9; Isa. 38:3), and of having kept God's commands (Gen. 26:5; 1 Kings 2:3). Thus, when the Zadokites are described as having "faithfully carried out the duties of [God's] sanctuary" (Ezek. 44:15), the key issue is their loyalty. They are not implied to be without moral blemish, any more than an Abraham was (Gen. 26:5); however, having been found faithful to God in a day of small things, their reward for loyal service is a place of responsible service in the kingdom (Matt. 25:21).

The question of rewards. The question of reward is a frequent theme in exilic writings, for obvious reasons. The Exile was, from the perspective of the exiles, a world turned upside down. The men in the black hats, the icons of evil, appeared to have won a convincing victory. The temptation to despair and to assimilate, to accommodate oneself to the "new realities," was strong, almost overpowering. How was this to be prevented? How could the exiles be helped to avoid this fate? The answer is by showing them how to don interpretive spectacles that turned reality the right way up and reminded them that ultimately the good would triumph.

This could be done in a number of different ways. For example, the "hero stories" of Daniel, Esther, and Nehemiah show a member of the exiled group triumphing in the midst of the exilic situation, living in the world but not of it, succeeding through wisdom or through the direct intervention of God on their behalf.¹⁹ In a different way, Ezekiel's temple vision turns the world right side up for his hearers, showing them a world in which faithful service of Israel's God receives its due reward.

That reward is, in Ezekiel's vision, a graded reward. Those who have been most faithful (the Zadokites) are rewarded with the greatest access to God; those who have been less faithful (Levites, princes, people) are progressively further at a distance from the throne. This gradation of reward should be neither overstressed nor understressed; there is real differentiation on the basis of merit, yet all the renewed people receive the fundamental blessing of being restored to God's land, with God dwelling in their midst.

Both of these aspects of Ezekiel's teaching are present in the New Testament. (1) In the vision of the new Jerusalem in Revelation 21, the fundamental equality of the saints is stressed. All are made perfect and granted standing in the presence of God himself, the heavenly Most Holy Place, which is the entire city. This is true because of the "covenant of grant" given to all of us who are in Christ; his righteousness is the basis for our full inheritance. In him, through faith, every Christian receives the righteousness of God (Rom. 3:22). In the parable of the workers in the vineyard, those who have worked hardest and longest receive the same reward as those who are hired at the eleventh hour (Matt. 20:1–16).

(2) Yet there are also texts that seem to affirm gradation in reward. In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul draws a contrast between two types of builders. Both are Christians, building up God's church on the only available foundation, Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:11); but one builds with gold, silver, and precious stones, while the other builds with wood, hay, and straw (3:12). The works of each will be exposed on the Day of Judgment, its quality tested with fire (3:13). If what a person has built survives, he or she will receive a reward. If it is burned up, he or she will suffer loss (3:14–15). Both are equally saved (3:15), but they receive different rewards.²⁰

Intriguingly, the two Synoptic versions of the parable of the talents present complementary pictures. In Matthew, the focus is on the sameness of the reward that the faithful stewards receive: The man who has been faithful with two talents hears his master say exactly the same words as the one who was faithful with five: "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" (Matt. 25:21, 23). Both have been equally responsible with different amounts and so receive the same reward. In Luke's account, however, the one who faithfully achieved a tenfold increase in the money is rewarded with charge of ten cities, while the servant whose stewardship resulted in a fivefold increase is awarded charge over five cities (Luke 19:17, 19). Starting off with the same amount, their differing fruitfulness receives a graded reward.

There is also a desire throughout the Old Testament for a fully righteous priest who will be able to stand before God on the basis of his faithfulness. In 1 Samuel 2:35, in response to the unfaithfulness of the priests of the day, Hophni and Phinehas, God promised that in the future he would raise up "a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and mind." Ultimately, both that promise and that desire find their fulfillment in the coming of Jesus, the merciful and faithful high priest of God's appointing (Heb. 2:17). He is the only one who ever has stood, or ever will be able to stand, before God in his own righteousness, to offer to him the prayers and praises of his people. As a result, he is the high priest whom we need to enable us to approach the heavenly throne with boldness (Heb. 4:15–16). Our privileged access comes not from our own righteousness but from his.

Contemporary Significance

ON REWARDS. "What's in it for me?" may seem a crass approach to discerning religious truth. Such an approach smacks too much of health, wealth, and prosperity teachers, who promise an immediate cash payoff for acts of devotion to God. In reaction, Christians have sometimes wanted to discuss the questions of faith "more objectively," as if we should be able to delight in a religion that is true, even though its truth is of no benefit to us personally. An extreme position in this direction was developed by Samuel Hopkins in late eighteenth-century New England, who held that a Christian should be willing to be damned for the glory of God.²¹ The true believer should, so the argument went, desire to serve God even in the absence of any reward.

Scripture is more balanced than either the health-and-wealth extreme or the Samuel Hopkins extreme. Jesus himself asks us to consider carefully the payoff involved in different allegiances when he says, "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?" (Matt. 16:26). He urges us to expend ourselves to store up treasure in heaven (Luke 12:33). Paul stresses repeatedly that our sonship makes us heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17); it is this future reward that makes our present sufferings of little account (8:18). The world may consider that promise of little account, disdainfully describing it as "pie in the sky when you die," but for Paul it is the basis for a hope that engenders patience in the present (8:25). This hope is not mercenary; it is simply the natural desire of love to possess its object.²² The person who disdains "pie in the sky" is probably a person with no love of pie.

The function of the scriptural teaching of rewards is twofold: It stresses the accountability of the saints to God as well as their future vindication by him.²³ On the one hand, God expects fruitfulness from his servants and will hold everyone accountable for the use of the resources and opportunities entrusted to each one. Much is expected of the one to whom much is given. On the other hand, it is *God* to whom we are accountable and to whom we are to look for our reward.

This latter aspect of the Bible's teaching is particularly important for those in exile like Ezekiel's readers and for us, who struggle to live in a world where it seems that the immoral thrive while the godly struggle to make ends meet. It speaks to those who, like the psalmist, are tempted to envy the arrogant on account of the prosperity of the wicked (Ps. 73:3). It speaks to all of us who have bought into the ancient lie, presently promoted vigorously from Madison Avenue, that "a man's life . . . consist[s] in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15).

The answer for Ezekiel, as for the psalmist, comes from a visit to the sanctuary, the place of God's presence with his people. There he is shown that what really counts in life are not the toys of this world but the joys of life in the presence of God. Ezekiel could have echoed the psalmist's words of Psalm 73:25–28:

Whom have I in heaven but you?

And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. But as for me, it is good to be near God.

I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.

In biblical terms, the reward that Christians look for and will receive is not a material one. We do not long for bigger and better mansions in heaven,²⁴ still less for Cadillacs and country club homes here on earth. Our heart's desire is rather to approach the presence of Almighty God and to stand before him, to be able to cast down our crowns at his feet and worship, lost in wonder, love, and praise. For us, as for the psalmist, it is simply good to be near God. That is the "pie in the sky" for which we long so passionately, and we could never be content to be eternally without it. As Jonathan Edwards put it:

Love to God . . . will make a man forever unwilling, utterly and finally, to be deprived of that part of his own happiness which he has in God's being blessed and glorified, and the more he loves him, the more unwilling he will be. So that this supposition, that a man can be willing to be perfectly and utterly miserable out of love to God, is inconsistent with itself.²⁵

The way of the cross. There is only one way to enter this reward of eternal life in the close presence of God: the way of the cross. When James and John sought the privilege of sitting at Jesus' right and left hand in glory, the problem was not what they sought but the way in which they sought it. To be close to Jesus is indeed the ultimate reward that heaven offers, but it is not to be had for the asking. Rather, it belongs to those who have drunk the cup of Jesus and shared in his baptism (Mark 10:38). Such privilege is opened up to all Christians through his death in our place. When we are baptized, we are baptized into his death and the fruits that flow from his

drinking of the cup in our place (Rom. 6:4). Yet the Scriptures also teach of a special reward reserved for those who have followed closely after the way of the suffering servant in this life (Mark 10:45). We are heirs of his glory in the world to come insofar as we share in his sufferings in the present (Rom. 8:17).

However, the privilege of close access to God is a reward we do not have to wait for eternity to begin to experience. We get to sample the firstfruits of the pie ahead of time. Even now, we can approach the throne of God with boldness, presenting our praises and our petitions, basking in the glory of his love. But if we expect to experience the full blessing of communion with God, our behavior must reflect his holiness. For the Zadokites, access to God's presence meant heavy restrictions on their lifestyle. There were things they could not touch, places they could not go to, food they could not eat, and clothes they could not wear if they were to minister in the presence of the all-holy God. So too for us, if we expect to experience the blessing of God's presence with us, then our lifestyle will be (from the world's perspective) restricted.

People around us will undoubtedly think us strange, "narrow" people because we do not do the things they delight to do (1 Peter 4:4). They will find us odd in our commitment to the truth over convenient lies, to God's Word over more fashionable contemporary perspectives, to morality in an age in which anything goes. But we are not accountable to them and their scale of values. Our scale of values should be centered around the glory of communion with God in the present and eternal life in his presence in the days to come, both of which should motivate us to lives of purity (1 John 3:3). Our world is turned right side up. As John Newton put it:

What words can express the privilege and honor of believers, who, whenever they please, have audience of the King of kings, whose compassion, mercy and power are, like his majesty, infinite. The world wonders at their indifference to the vain pursuits and amusements by which others are engrossed; that they are so patient in trouble, so inflexible in their conduct, so well satisfied with that state of poverty and obscurity which the Lord, for the most part, allots them, but the wonder

would cease if what passes in secret were publicly known. They have obtained the pearl of great price; they have communion with God; they derive their wisdom, strength and comfort from on high, and cast all their cares on him who, they assuredly know, vouchsafes to take care of them.²⁶

Ezekiel 45–46

WHEN YOU ALLOT the land as an inheritance, you are to present to the LORD a portion of the land as a sacred district, 25,000 cubits long and 20,000 cubits wide; the entire area will be holy. ²Of this, a section 500 cubits square is to be for the sanctuary, with 50 cubits around it for open land. ³In the sacred district, measure off a section 25,000 cubits long and 10,000 cubits wide. In it will be the sanctuary, the Most Holy Place. ⁴It will be the sacred portion of the land for the priests, who minister in the sanctuary and who draw near to minister before the LORD. It will be a place for their houses as well as a holy place for the sanctuary. ⁵An area 25,000 cubits long and 10,000 cubits wide will belong to the Levites, who serve in the temple, as their possession for towns to live in.

6" You are to give the city as its property an area 5,000 cubits wide and 25,000 cubits long, adjoining the sacred portion; it will belong to the whole house of Israel.

7" 'The prince will have the land bordering each side of the area formed by the sacred district and the property of the city. It will extend westward from the west side and eastward from the east side, running lengthwise from the western to the eastern border parallel to one of the tribal portions. ⁸This land will be his possession in Israel. And my princes will no longer oppress my people but will allow the house of Israel to possess the land according to their tribes.

⁹" 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: You have gone far enough, O princes of Israel! Give up your violence and oppression and do what is just and right. Stop dispossessing my people, declares the

Sovereign LORD. ¹⁰You are to use accurate scales, an accurate ephah and an accurate bath. ¹¹The ephah and the bath are to be the same size, the bath containing a tenth of a homer and the ephah a tenth of a homer; the homer is to be the standard measure for both. ¹²The shekel is to consist of twenty gerahs. Twenty shekels plus twenty-five shekels plus fifteen shekels equal one mina.

13" 'This is the special gift you are to offer: a sixth of an ephah from each homer of wheat and a sixth of an ephah from each homer of barley. ¹⁴The prescribed portion of oil, measured by the bath, is a tenth of a bath from each cor (which consists of ten baths or one homer, for ten baths are equivalent to a homer). ¹⁵Also one sheep is to be taken from every flock of two hundred from the well-watered pastures of Israel. These will be used for the grain offerings, burnt offerings and fellowship offerings to make atonement for the people, declares the Sovereign LORD. ¹⁶All the people of the land will participate in this special gift for the use of the prince in Israel. ¹⁷It will be the duty of the prince to provide the burnt offerings, grain offerings and drink offerings at the festivals, the New Moons and the Sabbaths at all the appointed feasts of the house of Israel. He will provide the sin offerings, grain offerings, burnt offerings and fellowship offerings to make atonement for the house of Israel.

¹⁸" 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: In the first month on the first day you are to take a young bull without defect and purify the sanctuary. ¹⁹The priest is to take some of the blood of the sin offering and put it on the doorposts of the temple, on the four corners of the upper ledge of the altar and on the gateposts of the inner court. ²⁰You are to do the same on the seventh day of the month for anyone

who sins unintentionally or through ignorance; so you are to make atonement for the temple.

²¹" 'In the first month on the fourteenth day you are to observe the Passover, a feast lasting seven days, during which you shall eat bread made without yeast. ²²On that day the prince is to provide a bull as a sin offering for himself and for all the people of the land. ²³Every day during the seven days of the Feast he is to provide seven bulls and seven rams without defect as a burnt offering to the LORD, and a male goat for a sin offering. ²⁴He is to provide as a grain offering an ephah for each bull and an ephah for each ram, along with a hin of oil for each ephah.

²⁵" 'During the seven days of the Feast, which begins in the seventh month on the fifteenth day, he is to make the same provision for sin offerings, burnt offerings, grain offerings and oil.

46:1" 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: The gate of the inner court facing east is to be shut on the six working days, but on the Sabbath day and on the day of the New Moon it is to be opened. ²The prince is to enter from the outside through the portico of the gateway and stand by the gatepost. The priests are to sacrifice his burnt offering and his fellowship offerings. He is to worship at the threshold of the gateway and then go out, but the gate will not be shut until evening. ³On the Sabbaths and New Moons the people of the land are to worship in the presence of the LORD at the entrance to that gateway. ⁴The burnt offering the prince brings to the LORD on the Sabbath day is to be six male lambs and a ram, all without defect. ⁵The grain offering given with the ram is to be an ephah, and the grain offering with the lambs is to be as much as he pleases, along with a hin of oil for each ephah. 6On

the day of the New Moon he is to offer a young bull, six lambs and a ram, all without defect. ⁷He is to provide as a grain offering one ephah with the bull, one ephah with the ram, and with the lambs as much as he wants to give, along with a hin of oil with each ephah. ⁸When the prince enters, he is to go in through the portico of the gateway, and he is to come out the same way.

9" 'When the people of the land come before the LORD at the appointed feasts, whoever enters by the north gate to worship is to go out the south gate; and whoever enters by the south gate is to go out the north gate. No one is to return through the gate by which he entered, but each is to go out the opposite gate. ¹⁰The prince is to be among them, going in when they go in and going out when they go out.

11" 'At the festivals and the appointed feasts, the grain offering is to be an ephah with a bull, an ephah with a ram, and with the lambs as much as one pleases, along with a hin of oil for each ephah.

12When the prince provides a freewill offering to the LORD—whether a burnt offering or fellowship offerings—the gate facing east is to be opened for him. He shall offer his burnt offering or his fellowship offerings as he does on the Sabbath day. Then he shall go out, and after he has gone out, the gate will be shut.

13" 'Every day you are to provide a year-old lamb without defect for a burnt offering to the LORD; morning by morning you shall provide it. ¹⁴You are also to provide with it morning by morning a grain offering, consisting of a sixth of an ephah with a third of a hin of oil to moisten the flour. The presenting of this grain offering to the LORD is a lasting ordinance. ¹⁵So the lamb and the grain

offering and the oil shall be provided morning by morning for a regular burnt offering.

16" 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: If the prince makes a gift from his inheritance to one of his sons, it will also belong to his descendants; it is to be their property by inheritance. ¹⁷If, however, he makes a gift from his inheritance to one of his servants, the servant may keep it until the year of freedom; then it will revert to the prince. His inheritance belongs to his sons only; it is theirs.

18 The prince must not take any of the inheritance of the people, driving them off their property. He is to give his sons their inheritance out of his own property, so that none of my people will be separated from his property.'"

¹⁹Then the man brought me through the entrance at the side of the gate to the sacred rooms facing north, which belonged to the priests, and showed me a place at the western end. ²⁰He said to me, "This is the place where the priests will cook the guilt offering and the sin offering and bake the grain offering, to avoid bringing them into the outer court and consecrating the people."

²¹He then brought me to the outer court and led me around to its four corners, and I saw in each corner another court. ²²In the four corners of the outer court were enclosed courts, forty cubits long and thirty cubits wide; each of the courts in the four corners was the same size. ²³Around the inside of each of the four courts was a ledge of stone, with places for fire built all around under the ledge. ²⁴He said to me, "These are the kitchens where those who minister at the temple will cook the sacrifices of the people."

In Ezekiel 44:28 the priests were promised no "inheritance" or "possession" in Israel, for the Lord would be their inheritance and possession. Ezekiel 45:1–8 follows up this reference to a new division of the land with a preliminary description of the central area of this land, a sacred strip running from the Mediterranean Sea in the west to the eastern edge of the Promised Land. The division of the land as a whole will be outlined in much greater detail in 47:13–48:35, but the central elements are clear already in chapter 45.

The issue of possession of the land was, of course, a pressing concern to the landless exiles. It had already surfaced as a problem in 33:24–29. The echoes of the theme of Jubilee that we noted at the outset of the vision in chapter 40 would also naturally have raised the question of a redistribution of the land. But the prophet was concerned about more than simply assuring the exiles that there would be an equitable reallocation of the land at some point in the future. Ezekiel wanted to reorient his hearers' focus onto what the original idea of a Promised Land was all about: a land in which God would dwell in their midst.

The primary focus of the division of the land for the prophet here is not safeguarding human equality and land rights, but rather asserting divine sovereignty and safeguarding the divine presence in their midst. Hence, Ezekiel's first concern in introducing the concept of a new division of the land is to insist that the people are to "present to the LORD" as an offering the central portion of the land as a "sacred district" (*qōdeš*, 45:1). This district is to measure 25,000 cubits by 20,000 cubits, comprising the land assigned to the priests (25,000 cubits by 10,000 cubits) and a similar area assigned to the Levites.²

The primary purpose of this sacred district is to provide a zone of graded holiness outside the temple, exactly analogous to that inside the temple.³ The entire temple complex is, from the perspective of the land, a "Most Holy Place" (45:3). The area immediately around the sanctuary is therefore reserved for the priests, in which they are to build their homes (45:3–4). The strip parallel to the priestly portion and to its north is reserved for the Levites and their cities (45:5), while the half-size strip to its south is for the city (45:6).⁴ To the east and west of the 25,000 cubit sacred square, the remainder of the sacred strip is to be allocated to the prince $(n\bar{a}s\,\hat{i}^{2})$ as his personal (or rather familial) inheritance.

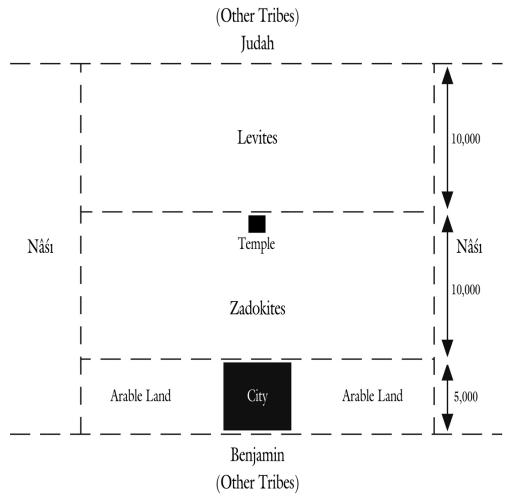


Figure 2. Distribution of Land in the Sacred Portion

The same principles of graded access that applied within the temple complex have thus been extrapolated to the land itself, resulting in an entirely temple-oriented geography. This is evident not simply from the central position of the temple within the land and the restricted access allowed to different groups and individuals, but even from the east-west alignment of the strips into which the land has been divided. In contrast to the rather randomly shaped chunks into which the land was divided in Joshua 12–21, in Ezekiel the entire land is aligned with the east-west orientation of the temple.⁵

Holiness is thus the key principle underlying the division of the land, as is evident from the fact that the word $q\bar{o}de\check{s}$ and its cognates occur no fewer than eleven times in Ezek. 45:1–6. At the center of this Holy Land is the temple, not the city or the king. The old Zion theology, which found its focus in the twin pillars of the election of Jerusalem and David, is now

refocused on the central assertion of Yahweh's kingship and rule in the temple.⁶

Even the future kings of the land, now addressed as "my princes," are subject to the Lord's oversight (45:8). Unlike the tribal "leaders" (same Heb. word) in the first division of the land in the days of Joshua (Num. 34:18), these princes in Ezekiel have no active part to play in distributing the land. The divine king has already allocated it, and their responsibility is limited to allowing the house of Israel to possess their tribal land in peace (Ezek. 45:8). Examples of this abuse in Israel's past are too numerous to require documentation; perhaps the classic case is Jezebel's judicial murder of Naboth in order to procure his vineyard for Ahab (1 Kings 21:1–16). Indeed, we may go so far as to say that this is the significant motivation in assigning a substantial portion of the land to the prince and his descendants. The prophet is not concerned so much to keep them in the manner to which they would like to become accustomed but rather to enable them to meet their own needs and to support the ministry of the temple without burdening and oppressing the people.

The primary focus of the prince's duties is temple-centered, as with virtually everything else in Ezekiel 40–48. Thus the prince is responsible to ensure that accurate weights and measures are used in gathering up the offerings and gifts of the people (45:10–12). All are required to participate in the sacred offerings provided by the prince (45:13–16), and it is foreseen that this might be viewed as a possible means for the prince to enrich himself at the cost of the people by using disproportionate measures. Such a possibility is immediately disallowed.

But although the people provide the materials for the regular offerings (45:15–16), it is the prince's responsibility from his own resources to provide the offerings for the special occasions: Sabbaths, New Moons, and annual festivals (45:17). In both the regular and the special offerings, the prince has a central role as the representative of the people in worship, presenting the "sin offerings, grain offerings, burnt offerings and fellowship offerings to make atonement for the house of Israel" (45:17). This is a great privilege, especially given the central significance of purification and atonement in chapters 40–48.8

Mention of the sacrifices on these special occasions in the ritual calendar leads into a discussion of the ritual calendar itself. Like the vision of the

temple itself, Ezekiel's calendar appears to be a stripped-down, focused edition of what had previously been in force. There is no mention of the Feast of Weeks, the third annual festival, and the remaining two festivals (Passover and Tabernacles) have become virtually symmetrical festivals of purification, celebrated in the first and seventh months of the year respectively (45:18–25). Of the two, the Feast of Passover retains more of its distinctive features: It is explicitly named "the Passover," and the sevenday feast during which only unleavened bread is to be eaten and the application of sacrificial blood to the doorposts clearly recall the original festival (45:19–21). Yet its original character as a festival of the Lord's deliverance from Egypt is now subordinated to a concern for purifying the sanctuary.

The Passover feast proper is now preceded by a dual ceremony of cleansing the temple on the first and seventh days of the first month (45:18–20). During the seven days of the feast, the prince is to provide seven bulls and seven rams daily as a burnt offering, along with the daily purification offering of a male goat (45:23). This represents a substantial increase from the sacrifices demanded for the Passover in the Mosaic legislation of Numbers 28. The requirement to offer a bull as a purification offering for the prince himself and the entire community before the feast begins is in line with the requirements of Leviticus 4:14, however (Ezek. 45:22).

If the Passover feast is still named and recognizable, the festival in the seventh month, which takes place at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles, has lost all its original distinctiveness. It lacks any name or description, except for the fact that the prince is to provide the same offerings for it as at the Passover (45:25). There is apparently no comparable purification ceremony before it, nor is any ceremony recorded that might correspond to the Day of Atonement ceremony associated with this festival in Leviticus 16. The primary annual ritual purification of the central sanctuary now takes place at the beginning of the year. But Ezekiel's special interest in purification remains clear in the prominent place given to the sin offerings in the list of Ezek. 45:25. Both festivals thereby come to share the same interest in atonement for sin, which is the recurrent theme of Ezekiel's cult.¹⁰

The prince is also required to provide the offerings for the Sabbath and New Moon festivals (Ezek. 46:1–8). On the Sabbath, he is to offer six lambs and a ram as a burnt offering, along with the proportionate grain and

oil offerings to accompany them (46:4–5), while on the monthly New Moon festival, he is to offer the same plus a young bull (46:6). Of course, he cannot enter the inner court to offer these sacrifices himself; the priests must offer them on his behalf (46:2). However, he has the unique privilege as a layman of approaching to the threshold of the inner east gate and prostrating himself there before the Lord (46:2). "The people of the land," however, are only permitted to approach to the entrance of the gate (46:3). With eight steps leading up to the gateway and beyond it a corridor almost ninety feet long, it is clear that their view of the activities of the inner court is decidedly limited. In Ezekiel's program, the laity are being kept at a "safe" distance from the holy things.

At the annual festivals, God's people are required to present themselves and prostrate themselves before the Lord (46:9). The command for the vassal to present himself at the court of the great king was a common requirement of ancient covenant treaties;¹³ this is therefore an act of corporate submission on the part of the people before the divine king. The community at large is assigned no other tasks in the cult. Even their annual processions through the temple are in the "profane" north-south or south-north direction (46:9), at right angles to the "holy" east-west orientation of priestly ministrations at the altar of burnt offering (43:17).¹⁴ Though the people are clearly expected to offer sacrifices of their own (cf. 46:24), these are relegated to footnote status, barely perceptible in the peripheral vision of the prophet.

The representative nature of the prince as chief worshiper is clear from the fact that he enters in the midst of the people and goes out with them (46:10). But his privileged position is clear also from his access to the east gate of the inner court, which is opened for him whenever he wishes to offer a freewill sacrifice (46:12).

The section on the sacrifices closes with the requirements for the daily sacrifice, which is now limited to a single morning sacrifice of a year-old lamb, with its associated grain offering (Ezek. 46:13–14). The former practice of offering also an evening sacrifice, attested in Numbers 28:4 and 1 Kings 18:29, 36, goes unmentioned.

After his discussion of the sacrifices, Ezekiel returns to his previous topic, the inheritance of the prince (Ezek. 46:16–18; cf. 45:7–8). The prince holds this land leasehold rather than outright, in trust for future generations.

He can therefore only give it permanently to his children; if he should give it as a gift to one of his servants, it will revert to the crown at the year of freedom, the Jubilee year, when all land reverted to its original owners (Lev. 25:13). The purpose of this regulation is straightforward: In an economy where the king typically rewarded loyal service by gifts of land, there would have been a perpetual temptation for the king to acquire ever more land with which to reward his followers. Not so in the new Israel, which will be reconstituted as a nation of free peasants with an inalienable claim to their own land.

The fact that this powerful assertion against land stealing brackets the sacrificial regulations emphasizes the fact that the driving force behind the division of the land is not egalitarianism but divine sovereignty: The land is the Lord's and he divides it. For the prince to intrude on that divinely sanctioned division by amassing greater quantities of land for himself is as impermissible as intruding on the central presence of God in the inner sanctuary or offering improper sacrifices to God. The prince is thereby continually reminded that he is a vassal of the great king and must behave as such.

The entire section of Ezek. 44:1–46:24 is rounded off by a return to the beginning. The heavenly messenger, inactive since 44:4, returns to guide the prophet out of the inner court via the sacred rooms where the priests cook and eat the sacred offerings that are not permitted to leave the sanctity of the inner court (46:19–20). Together they arrive back at the outer court, where the prophet is shown "the kitchens" (L) at its four extremities, where the Levites are to cook the sacrifices of the people (46:21–24). The tour of the temple is thus neatly completed, having gone from the outside to the center (Ezek. 40:5–41:4) and back out again twice.¹⁶

Bridging Contexts

INTERPRETIVE PROBLEMS and their attempted solutions. The middle section of Ezekiel's temple vision has provided almost insoluble problems for a number of different interpretative approaches. The rabbis, convinced in the unbreakable unity of the Old Testament and able at times to resort to considerable ingenuity in their harmonizations, found it virtually impossible to harmonize the regulations of Ezekiel with those of Moses in the

Pentateuch. Indeed, it is recorded that one rabbi, Hananiah ben Hezekiah, hid himself away in his attic and burned three hundred barrels of oil in his lamp before being finally able to reconcile the different laws. But for his labors, the book of Ezekiel as a whole was in danger of being excluded from the canon.¹⁷ Unfortunately, the fruits of his efforts were lost to future generations "because of our iniquities." At times, the rabbis gave up altogether and referred their pupils to a higher authority: Elijah would explain it when he came.¹⁹

From an entirely different perspective, the middle portion of Ezekiel's temple vision has proved problematic to dispensationalists. Their difficulty is not in harmonizing Ezekiel and Moses but in harmonizing a "literal" interpretation of Ezekiel's temple as the millennial temple of the restored Jewish nation with the apparently plain New Testament teaching that the levitical sacrifices have been brought to an end with the death of Christ (Heb. 10). Once again, a number of different solutions have been suggested. The majority of dispensationalists have argued that the sacrifices are memorials to the sacrifice of Christ, with no atoning character. However, the idea that these are memorial sacrifices is nowhere apparent in Ezekiel, and it is specifically claimed by Ezekiel that these offerings *will* make atonement (Ezek. 45:15, 17, 20).²¹

Others have struggled with the identity of "the prince" ($n\bar{a}s\,\hat{i}$ ") in Ezekiel 40–48. Is he a messianic figure, as the "prince" of Ezekiel 34 and 37 appears to be?²² How then do we explain the need to warn the Messiah against sin (45:9; 46:18)? Does the Messiah need to offer a sin offering on his own behalf (45:22), and does he have children (46:16)?²³ But if he is not the Messiah, who is he?

These approaches, it seems to me, have run into difficulty because they have fallen into the classic temptation that besets those of us who take the unity of Scripture seriously. They have given priority to the universal over the particular, asking, "How can I make this text fit with what I know from the rest of Scripture?" rather than, "What distinctive truth does this particular passage teach?" As a result, commentaries on this passage tend to be long on harmonization and short on explanation. Actually, the interpretative problems that so stubbornly resist harmonization are significant keys to understanding the meaning of the passage and of the temple vision as a whole, for which this provides the center.

The nature of a vision and its message here. What the approach of rabbis and dispensationalists alike forget is that Ezekiel 40-48 presents a vision, not legislation. To be sure, part of the vision is in legislative form, but it is vision in the form of legislation, not legislation in the form of vision. Legislation is a law program designed to be carried out; it must therefore either be harmonized with existing legislation or supersede it. Legislation is intended to be interpreted literally as meaning exactly what it says. If God's intent through Ezekiel was to impart new legislation to supplement or supersede the law of Moses, then it was a failure. The returning Jews made no apparent effort to implement the changes proposed, even those that would have required no radical expense or earth-moving equipment, such as the two annual festivals.²⁴ Nor is there any indication within the vision that its implementation is to be postponed to a future millennial temple. Unlike the battle with Gog, which has frequent time indicators fixing it in the distant future, the temple of Ezekiel 40-48 is already extant in visionary form in Ezekiel's own time.25

A vision, however, does not need to be carried out in its details to achieve its purpose. When Martin Luther King Jr. cried out in his famous speech "I have a dream . . ." and went on to outline a vision of black and white children playing together in harmony, his purpose was to encourage repentance, changed hearts, and hope. Provided that emotions were stirred and minds changed to feel sorrow over past attitudes and to envision the possibility of a new future, the dream would have accomplished its purpose, even had repressive laws and practical difficulties prevented the physical realization of the dream. In the same way, Ezekiel's vision was intended to encourage repentance, faithful endurance, and hope of a future unlike the past.

In what ways, then, does Ezekiel 45–46 contribute to this goal of bringing the exiles to repentance, endurance, and hope? (1) The passage (and the vision) asserts that the Lord alone is King. Instead of asking whether "the prince" is a messianic figure, it would be better to ask why the messianic figure of this vision appears in so muted tones, with such limited powers. He is certainly still a figure of great privilege. He owns a substantial portion of real estate bordering on the sacred district; he approaches closer to the Most Holy Place than any other non-Levite; he offers sacrifices on behalf of the whole people; he is the head of a dynasty.

But in power he is still well short of the classic form of the central royal figure of the future golden age.²⁶

Even the identification of the prince as a descendant of David is lacking (unlike chs. 34 and 37), although it is hard to imagine that Ezekiel had a different dynasty in mind. Why is that? Because in Ezekiel's vision there is another central royal figure, the Lord himself reigning in the temple. The past abuses of the monarchy will be done away with, legislated out of existence by a rearrangement of the land and by specific commands to the future monarch; but the monarch himself remains as a representative of the people. He remains in place, but only as the vassal of the Great King, God himself.²⁷

(2) The passage (and the vision) teaches that God is doing a new and greater thing that involves time as well as space. Instead of asking how we can square Ezekiel's sacrificial legislation with that of the Pentateuch, it would be better to ask about the distinctive goal of his program.²⁸ In contrast to the Pentateuchal program, Ezekiel's sacrifices appear to be more numerous and more focused on the concept of purification. This is another way of conveying the same message as the temple building itself, which is larger and more restricted in access than the former temple. God is doing something greater than the former things, a greatness that shows itself in the dimensions of the holy space and the number of the sacrifices.²⁹ God is also doing something that will prevent any repetition of the contamination of the past that drove him from the land, through erecting high walls and buffer zones and inaugurating more rites of purgation.

But the cosmogonic process of creating a new world involves ordering not merely spaces and inhabitants but time itself.³⁰ For that reason, the distinct lack of "timelessness" in the vision is significant. Unlike most eschatological visions in the Bible, which are essentially static tableaux, frozen in time, Ezekiel envisages a place with Sabbaths and New Moons and new years, a place where the year of Jubilee rolls around and the prince has children. In Ezekiel's reordering of the festival calendar, time itself is brought under the discipline of the new age.

(3) The passage once again underlines the message that the temple is at the center of time and space in the new age. It dominates the restored land, which is entirely oriented with reference to it. Social status is entirely determined by access and position relative to it. Providing for its worship services is to be the dominant concern of the prince and people alike. In place of the old centers of Zion and the Davidic king, now everything revolves around the temple. The city and the king are still there, but they no longer have personal names, so that nothing may detract from the glory and prominence of the dwelling of Yahweh in the midst of his people. To put it into a paraphrase of Isaiah's distinctly messianic language, Ezekiel would have said, "For unto us a temple is constructed, to us a sanctuary is given" (cf. Isa. 9:6).

The prince's position, tasks, and responsibilities are all subordinated to the central vision of God's dwelling in the midst of his people in the temple. Thus, since Jesus is the new temple, the glory of God dwelling in the midst of men and women, it is the temple that is the primary "messianic" figure in Ezekiel 40–48. It is the temple that points us to Jesus, not the prince.

The nature of sacrifice and its relation to Jesus. This concern with the presence of God in the midst of his people explains why the sacrifices are central to the temple vision. The entire levitical system of sacrifice served to undergird the covenant relationship of Israel and God. Sacrifice functioned primarily in four different ways in ancient Israel, each reflecting an aspect of the covenant relationship. (1) It provided a means of restoring breaches in the covenant relationship between the vassal and the Great King, through the giving of a substitute as a ransom payment for the sinner. (2) It functioned as a tribute payment from the vassal to his overlord. (3) It provided an opportunity for the vassal king to enjoy a covenant meal with his suzerain. (4) It served as a means of ensuring the necessary cleansing of impurity so that the holy suzerain might dwell with the vassal.³¹ The various sacrifices of the Old Testament each served one or more of these goals.

For the New Testament, however, all of these sacrifices find their fulfillment in Christ. He is the One who atones for us; he is the One who pays our tribute for us; he is the One in whom we experience the blessings of intimate fellowship with the Father; he is the One who cleansed the heavenly temple once and for all on our behalf.

(1) Jesus is our ransom, the atoning sacrifice paid for our redemption. As Mark 10:45 reminds us, Jesus came in order "to give his life as a ransom for many." The apostle Peter tells us, "it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed . . . but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Peter 1:18–19). Jesus, like

Isaac, is the beloved Son, to be offered by his own Father (Matt. 3:17)—though for him there is no animal substituted. Jesus himself is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The wages of sin require the death of the covenant-breaker unless a ransom be paid on his or her behalf. Yet unlike the burnt offering, which was offered daily, Jesus offered his sacrifice once and "for all time" on the cross (Heb. 10:12–14). There is no need for a continued repetition of the death of Christ for it was of infinite value.

- (2) In addition, Jesus has offered tribute in our place. He lived the perfect life for us, thus fulfilling all the obligations of the covenant. He humbled himself and became obedient even to the point of death (Phil. 2:8). That is the importance of what theologians call Christ's "active obedience," the fact that his work was not simply to come and die on the cross to pay for our sins, but first of all to come and live the perfect life for us, which is now credited to our account. Without it, his death would not have been sufficient; it would merely have removed our covenant breaking. What God demands of his people, however, is not only no covenant breaking but perfect covenant keeping. Jesus kept the demands of the law fully in our place.
- (3) But as well as being our atonement and our tribute offering, Jesus is also our fellowship offering. In the Lord's Supper, we remember Jesus' death on the cross, where he became the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Yet the meal aspect of the Lord's Supper belongs to the symbolism of the fellowship offering. Unlike Mesopotamian observances, in which the table was laid primarily for the benefit of the deity, the Lord invites his people to sit down to table in his presence and celebrate our deliverance together.³² We feed on the body of Christ, just as in Old Testament times the people actually ate the fellowship offering. The cup we share is called by Jesus "the new covenant in my blood" (1 Cor. 11:25), recalling the blood of the old covenant, the blood of the burnt offerings and peace offerings sacrificed at Mount Sinai, which was sprinkled on the people (Ex. 24:8). Like the peace offering, the Lord's Supper is a covenant meal, a celebration of the new covenant family of God's goodness and radical self-giving.
- (4) Finally, Jesus is our purification offering. Hence in the book of Hebrews the blood of Jesus is not simply applied to the saints, it is applied to the heavenly sanctuary itself. It is efficacious to purify that heavenly

sanctuary once and for all, thus ensuring that God can dwell forever in the midst of his people (Heb. 9:23). Because of this definitive purgation, believers now have confident and direct access to the Most Holy Place itself (10:19)! That purgation no longer needs to be repeated in the shadowy forms of the levitical order because in Christ the fullness of the new order has come!

Contemporary Significance

A PATTERN FOR Christian worship. If the goal of the vision of Ezekiel 45–46 is to bring the exiles to repentance, endurance, and hope through a vision of reordered worship, how may this passage have the same effect on us?

In the first place, it reminds us as well as them that the heavenly order is different from the appearances of the mundane world in which we live. In our worship, we are constructing an alternative outlook on the world, an alternative view of reality, which challenges the worldview of the majority. In our liturgy, we come apart from the everyday world in which we live the rest of the week and envision a different world, a place where we exiles can find a home. Ezekiel's temple provides us a four-dimensional map of that sacred space, inviting us to consider well its spiritual geography, topography, and chronology and to repent and leave behind our earthbound focus.

Moreover, in Ezekiel's vision the Lord is enthroned as King, exalted far above any rivals. In our worship too, there should be no doubt about the sovereignty of God. Our songs, prayers, readings, testimonies, and other varied elements should be theocentric and Christocentric, exalting the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the world, God the Father may be denigrated, disregarded, and ridiculed; his Son's name may be most often heard taken in vain; his Spirit may be regularly grieved and blasphemed against. But the meetings of his people should all the more be filled with his praises and focused on hearing and doing his will.

In Ezekiel's vision, the prophet clearly anticipates God's doing something new, something greater even than the faith once delivered to Moses. What Ezekiel and the other Old Testament saints looked forward to has now come about in Christ. As the writer to the Hebrews put it: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in

various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:1–2). This greater privilege that we have gives us reason to worship with greater joy and greater reverence and awe than our spiritual forefathers, who lived ahead of the coming of Christ (12:28).

Specifically, the pattern of the Old Testament sacrifices, as delivered to Moses and writ large by Ezekiel, provides a pattern for Christian worship.

- Over the doorway into worship stands written the need for the forgiveness of sins, and at the heart of worship must be the continual return to God's provided ransom, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." This was the focus of the burnt offering.
- In our worship, we should focus our thoughts and give thanks not simply for the passive obedience of Christ—his death on the cross for us—but also for his active obedience—his perfect life lived for us, by which the obligations of the covenant are fulfilled. This was the focus of the grain or tribute offering.
- The goal of our worship—what Christ has achieved for us through his perfect life and atoning death—is nothing less than fellowship with God and with one another around the Lord's Table. This was the focus of the fellowship offering.
- In order for us to worship in the presence of God, both we and the heavenly tabernacle itself must be purified of all unrighteousness. This was the focus of the purification offering and of the self-offering of Jesus, whose blood purifies us from all sin (1 John 1:7).

Contemporary worship. Worship informed by this pattern will be different in a number of ways from much of what passes for worship in the contemporary church. To begin with, it will have a God-centered (and not merely Christ-centered) focus. The goal of Jesus' earthly ministry was to bring glory to the Father's name (John 12:27–28); in return, God the Father would glorify him (13:31–32). Yet so often the Father disappears almost completely from our contemporary worship songs, replaced by an exclusive focus on my relationship with Jesus.

True worship should also preserve the law-gospel dynamic, which lies at the heart of the best historic liturgies. In other words, in order to appreciate the good news of the gospel we need to confront ourselves again with the reality of God's perfect law, which condemns our own sin and points us to Jesus as our sinless substitute. We need to remind ourselves of our personal impurity, which must be cleansed away before we can approach the all-holy God. Without a deep appreciation of our sinfulness and impurity, real worship is not a possibility.

In that worship, all God's people now have a central part to play. Here is where our privilege once again far exceeds that envisaged by Ezekiel. Whereas the ordinary people in his vision were to be kept at a distance from God's presence because of their past sins and a concern to protect his holiness, now, covered in the blood of Christ, we may draw near to the Most Holy Place itself (Heb. 10:19). We need no human priests to interpose between us and the holy God, to conduct our worship on our behalf, for we have a great priest, Jesus, who has perfectly met our needs (10:21).

In the light of that incredible privilege, let us indeed count it a great blessing to draw near to God in worship and adoration. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, and let us stir one another on to love and good deeds and lives of purified holiness, until the approaching day comes when Christ our King will return and we will be exiles no more (Heb. 10:22–25).

Ezekiel 47:1–12

THE MAN BROUGHT me back to the entrance of the temple, and I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was coming down from under the south side of the temple, south of the altar. ²He then brought me out through the north gate and led me around the outside to the outer gate facing east, and the water was flowing from the south side.

³As the man went eastward with a measuring line in his hand, he measured off a thousand cubits and then led me through water that was ankle-deep. ⁴He measured off another thousand cubits and led me through water that was knee-deep. He measured off another thousand and led me through water that was up to the waist. ⁵He measured off another thousand, but now it was a river that I could not cross, because the water had risen and was deep enough to swim in—a river that no one could cross. ⁶He asked me, "Son of man, do you see this?"

Then he led me back to the bank of the river.

Then I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river.

He said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, where it enters the Sea. When it empties into the Sea, the water there becomes fresh.

Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live.

The Fishermen will stand along the shore; from En Gedi to En Eglaim there will be places for spreading nets. The fish will be of many kinds—like

the fish of the Great Sea. ¹¹But the swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they will be left for salt. ¹²Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing."

Original Meaning

EZEKIEL'S TOUR OF the temple is now complete. His vision at this point turns outward to the rest of the land and the influence that the thorough restoration of the temple as the place of God's dwelling will have on it. That influence is nothing short of a total transformation from death to life, a transformation expressed in the visionary form of a life-giving river that flows out from the temple.

The source of the living water is the temple itself, or, more precisely, the south side of the temple, south of the altar (Ezek. 47:1). This was the site of the "Sea" in Solomon's temple, a massive bronze pool whose practical purpose was to provide the water required for cleansing (1 Kings 7:23, 39). Its significance was more than merely practical, however. By calling it "the Sea" (hayyām), a rather grandiose title for an object smaller than most above-ground swimming pools today (fifteen feet in diameter), it also appears to have had a symbolic significance, representing the forces of chaos subjugated in the orderly cosmos of the temple. In ancient Near Eastern mythology, the sea (hayyām) was one of the chief enemies of the gods, whose defeat was necessary before the cosmic order could be established. This same imagery is present in the Psalms, especially in the enthronement psalms, where the sea's chaos is subjugated by the Lord (Ps. 46:2–3; 93:3–4; 95:5; 96:11; 98:7).

In Ezekiel's vision, the static categories of the old symbolism have been transformed into dynamic motion. The "Sea" now becomes the source of a life-giving river that flows out from the temple, another idea with extensive roots in the Bible. Thus in Psalm 46, in response to the imagined chaos of the earth giving way and the mountains falling "into the heart of the sea"

(!), the psalmist draws strength from the idyllic picture of the river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells (46:2–4). The archetype of this river is the earth-fructifying stream that flows out in four branches from the prototypical sanctuary of Eden (Gen. 2:10–14).⁵

The river flowing from Ezekiel's temple follows the sacred route eastward from the inner court, out through the (closed!) east gate of the outer court (Ezek. 47:2). Because Ezekiel cannot follow it through there, he is brought round by the north gate and sees it trickling out of the south side of the gate. In comparison with the abundant streams of the traditional picture, the renewed temple provides at first a minimal flow. Yet the stream that starts out so pitifully small miraculously becomes progressively larger the further he journeys along it. At first, it is a trickle; after a thousand cubits (1,500 feet), it is ankle-deep (47:3); after another thousand cubits, it is knee-deep (47:4), then waist-deep (47:4), and finally an uncrossable torrent (47:5). The guiding angel asks him to pause here and ponder its significance: "Son of man, do you see this?" (47:6).

The miraculous growth of this river from small beginnings is not the only lesson to be observed, however. This river is also a transforming force wherever it flows. It brings fertility to the ground surrounding it, indicated by the presence of a great many trees on both sides of the river (47:7). After flowing eastward and then south through the Arabah, which here seems to indicate simply the region of the Jordan Valley, the river transforms the Dead Sea, healing its waters—that is, turning its salty water, which is undrinkable and hostile to life, into drinkable, life-supporting water (47:8). This Edenic river will induce Paradise-like levels of fertility, teeming with all kinds of swarming creatures (47:9), like the waters of Genesis 1:20, and a great many fish "of many kinds" (Ezek. 47:10 cf. Gen. 1:21). To sum up the pictorial message in straightforward speech: "Where the river flows everything will live" (Ezek. 47:9).

Nor is this abundant fertility merely fertility in the abstract. It is explicitly fertility as a blessing to the restored people of Israel. The abundant fish will support an equally abundant number of fishermen, from En Gedi to En Eglaim. These are two locations span the shores of the Dead Sea; thus, "from En Gedi to En Eglaim" encompasses the scope of the whole Dead Sea.⁷ But even while the waters of the Dead Sea will be healed, its one

existing use, as the source of valuable salt deposits, will not be eliminated (47:11).

The numerous trees of Ezek. 47:7 are now more closely defined as "fruit trees" (lit., "food trees," 47:12). They will not suffer from any lack of moisture; rather, as with the depiction of the righteous person in Psalm 1, "their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail." Indeed, they will be so full of life that they will bear new fruit every month to feed the population, and their leaves will be for healing (Ezek. 47:12). All of this will be brought about because they are fed from the source of life-giving fruitfulness, the stream that flows from the temple.

Bridging Contexts

DISTINCTIVENESS IN EZEKIEL'S use of the river. The image of a life-giving stream flowing from the sanctuary is ubiquitous in the Scriptures, from the opening chapters of Genesis (Gen. 2:10–14) to the closing chapter of Revelation. Revelation 22 features a river similar in many respects to that of Ezekiel 47, which flows from the throne of God and the Lamb out to nourish the (single) tree of life, whose fruit appears every month and whose leaves are "for the healing of the nations" (Rev. 22:1–2). The motif is also attested in mythological literature from the ancient Near East. Yet because of the frequent use of this motif, it would be easy to overlook what is distinctive about Ezekiel's use.

- (1) The most striking aspect of Ezekiel's river is that, unlike the other rivers of life, it starts out as an insignificant trickle and only ends up as a thunderous torrent after a distance. This is something that no upheaval in the topography of Palestine can accomplish literally. What is more, it is precisely this growth from insignificant beginnings that the prophet is instructed to observe. In the language of his later colleague, the lesson is that he should not despise the day of small things (Zech. 4:10). Though the work of God starts out in tiny, seemingly insignificant ways, it will ultimately accomplish God's goals with unstoppable power. In a similar way the tiny mustard seed, to which Jesus likened the kingdom of God, grows to become a mighty tree (Matt. 13:31).
- (2) Another aspect that Ezekiel's river gives prominence to is the theme of transformation. The other rivers of life are eternal, fertility-inducing

streams. They bring life to everything they touch, but there is no reflection on any prior state of the land that they impact. In contrast, Ezekiel's river brings not merely life but life-from-the-dead. It not only provides fresh, living water, but "heals" the dead, salt-contaminated water of the Dead Sea.

The motif of "healing the water" brings with it echoes of Israel's earlier history. At Marah, Israel's first stop in the desert after crossing over the Reed Sea, the water was so bitter that Israel could not drink it. In spite of the people's grumbling, the Lord graciously gave Moses the answer to their need: a piece of wood that, when thrown into the water, turned it sweet. Then the Lord promised that if they walked in faithfulness to the covenant they would experience him as *yahweh* $r\bar{a}p\bar{a}$, "the LORD, who heals you" (Ex. 15:22–26). Similarly, in 2 Kings 2:19, the men of the city of Jericho appealed to Elisha because of the "bad water" of that city. This "bad water" was itself the result of the city's being under a covenant curse (see 1 Kings 16:34), yet God graciously transformed that curse into a blessing through his prophet (2 Kings 2:21–22).

In both cases, then, in spite of their past unfaithfulness, Israel experienced the Lord as their healer by turning to the prophet (Moses and Elisha respectively) and trusting in God's Word. So too in Ezekiel 47, the message is that God's transforming power flows out from the temple into the lives of sinners, healing them and restoring them to their place in the covenant community. In this context, the reference to the continued existence of the salt marshes (47:11) is not merely a footnote driven by the pragmatic necessities of life; such concerns are signally lacking in this vision. Rather, it is necessary that salt should be available as an element of covenant consummation.

(3) The third distinctive to be noted about the river of Ezekiel's vision is the way in which it runs counter to the general trend in this vision to separate off the holy from the profane, to protect the glory of the divine presence from contamination by sinful humankind. The river bridges the gap, demonstrating the fact that the protection of the sphere of the holy is not an end in itself. It is intended to ensure the presence of God in the midst of his people, a presence that will have visible and tangible effects of blessing for the people. Blessing is not a category restricted to those who have access to the inner reaches of the holy space; it flows out as widely as the river of life does. This does not yet mean global transformation and

renewal, for the river itself flows only as far as the Dead Sea. But it means renewal for all who are part of God's covenant people, native-born Israelite and resident alien alike (cf. 47:22).¹¹

The river in the New Testament. In the New Testament, apart from Revelation 22 (see above), the Gospel of John develops this vision of Ezekiel most fully. Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that the water he gives will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life (John 4:14).

More explicitly still, Jesus stands up on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles and calls the thirsty to come and drink from him. He promises that "streams of living water will flow from within him," and John adds the interpretive note, "By this he meant the Spirit" (John 7:38–39). Against the background of Ezekiel 47, the imagery is transparent. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the heart of believers, which was accomplished at Pentecost, turns each believer into a miniature temple. As such, he or she becomes not simply a separated sphere of holiness, a walled garden in the midst of a wasteland. Rather, the believer as a temple is to be a source of blessing to all around him or her, by transmitting to them the life-giving message of the gospel. By its transforming power, the gospel heals the spiritually dead, making them alive in Christ and fruitful in their service for God.

Contemporary Significance

THE WALLS OR THE RIVER? Christianity has always struggled against two pale imitations of itself, each of which seizes on one aspect of the truth and absolutizes it. On the one hand is legalism, which emphasizes the need for separation and distinctive living, for absolute obedience to the law. But legalism lacks the freedom and joy and fullness of life that are key marks of the Christian walk. On the other hand is antinomianism, the attitude that celebrates the freedom of being a Christian. But antinomianism tends to throw off any moral imperatives.

Legalism delights in preaching the walls of Ezekiel 40–46, but speaks only under its breath about the river of life in Ezekiel 47. Antinomianism loudly proclaims the wonderful benefits of the river of life, but does its best to conceal the walls of Ezekiel's temple by relegating them to a different time period in God's dealings with humankind.¹² Ezekiel's vision and the New Testament teachings that draw on it for inspiration hold together in

creative tension walls and river, law and grace, as an eternal aspect of God's dealings with humankind.

Now I have never met anyone who admits to being a legalist or an antinomian; it is not a title like Calvinist or Arminian, Lutheran or Reformed, which devotees claim joyfully. Yet if we search our hearts honestly, most of us would probably find in our thinking about ourselves and in our presentation of the gospel a struggle over how to keep those biblical truths in balance. By nature, we are each drawn towards an unhealthy emphasis on either the walls or the river. Only Jesus has maintained the perfect balance between the two. On the one hand, he showed the rich young ruler a wall so high he could not cross it, whose gate was so narrow that he could not carry his wealth through with him (Matt. 19:16–24). On the other hand, he extended the gracious offer of living water without barriers to a despised Samaritan woman, whose marital history and present sexual involvement left much to be desired (John 4).

The example of Jesus shows us that keeping these truths in balance means that there is more than one way to present the gospel faithfully. Traditionally, most evangelistic efforts have presented sin as humanity's basic problem, forgiveness (freedom from the guilt of sin) as humanity's basic need, and the gospel as the means by which we reach the solution, peace with God. Historically, this presentation of the gospel has worked well in communities with a strong ethical-moral sense, where people generally feel an obligation to live up to a certain standard or code of morality. It is a way of showing those who believe in the existence of walls, like the rich young ruler, that they themselves are on the outside. This is essentially Paul's approach in the letter to the Romans: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," "the wages of sin is death," but "there is . . . no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:23; 6:23, 8:1).

Increasingly, however, we are living in a society that is not merely immoral but amoral, unused to thinking in the categories of right and wrong.¹³ In such a postmodern society, where fewer and fewer people feel any sense of guilt over their lifestyle, it is important that we recognize there is another way of presenting the gospel. In this approach, similar to that which Jesus used with the Samaritan woman, the focus is on bondage or emptiness, not guilt, as humanity's basic problem. One's basic need then

becomes liberation (freedom from the slavery and futility of sin), and the gospel is the means whereby we enter the freedom to be what we were created to be—God-centered worshipers. This is Paul's approach to the gospel in Galatians: You were in bondage to a futile, empty lifestyle, but Christ came to set you free.

The gospel as freedom and fullness. Ezekiel 47:1–12 presents the gospel as freedom and fullness. Life in all its fullness is what all God's people will experience through the renewing presence of God in their land. A temple-centered life, which is nothing less than a God-centered life, is the way to true freedom. The river that flows from that center has the power to take a dead life as well as a dead land and fill it with true health. Abandoning that center means nothing less than abandoning the source of all life.

Ironically, many people abandon the temple-centered life because they are in search of total freedom. They want a life without any rules and restrictions, without the kind of boundaries that Ezekiel 40–46 has so laboriously set up. But all they achieve is trading one center for another, the true God for idols. Sin is not just breaking the rules, it is living a life centered around something other than God. The testimony of Ezekiel 47 is that though such a life may seem to impart a kind of freedom, it really leads to bondage and death.

True freedom, the kind that comes from centering your life on the true and living God, is contagiously life-giving. Even the Dead Sea cannot hold out against its life-giving power. Life and fruitfulness are evident everywhere it flows. So also our lives as believers are to have an infectious attractiveness as people see something unique in us. What people taste as they come in contact with our lives should be honey, not gall. New covenant believers are themselves indwelt by the power of the Holy Spirit, so they become themselves miniature temples, centers from which lifegiving water will flow out to the nations (John 7:38). The thirsty world should find in the church the only drink that will slake their thirst. Regrettably, all too often we require sinners to get their act together before they are allowed anywhere near our fountains, for fear that they might contaminate them. Too many churches have hung up the spiritual equivalent of signs that say: "No shoes, no shirt, no service."

"Fishers of men." Just as the water is transformed in Jesus' interpretation from a physical to a spiritual flow, so also is the activity of those who stand beside it. In place of literal fishermen surrounding the Dead Sea, Jesus calls his disciples to be "fishers of men" (Mark 1:17). The mark of Jesus' resurrection power in John's Gospel is, not coincidentally, a miraculous catch of a huge number of fish, which closes out the careers of the disciples as ordinary fishermen and inaugurates their ministry as those through whom eternal life will be brought to the nations.

We too are called to be "fishers of men" in God's service, yet what kind of fishermen are we? What kind of fishermen wait for the fish to come to them and give up at the first refusal? On the contrary, effective fishermen take on themselves the task of pursuing the fish where they are and refusing to take no for an answer, studying diligently how best to increase their catch. One way or another, insofar as it lies in their power, they will land that fish.

Yet, lest in our enthusiasm for the gospel we become too triumphalist, Ezekiel 47 reminds us that God's work often starts out from small beginnings and progresses slowly. The mighty river of life, which at the end is too deep to cross, begins with the barest trickle. The temptation is for us to be impressed by large numbers and impressive presentation and to look down on the slow, steady work of the Spirit in building his church individual by individual. We seek reenactments of the Day of Pentecost, when three thousand believers were added to the church, and scorn the slow, steady accretion of Christians to the fold.

But the church of Jesus Christ, for all its impressive final form, when multitudes will flock in "from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God" (Luke 13:29), often exists in the present as a trickle, not as a flood. God's work is often done in slow and steady ways that may never catch the headlines but nonetheless achieve his purposes. Our task, whether seeing the work of God progress like a mighty river or a dripping tap, is to seek to be faithful in centering our lives around Jesus Christ, our temple. We are called to taste the goodness of life in all its fullness in him, even in our present exile, and to point others joyfully to him as the source of our life.

Ezekiel 47:13–48:35

THIS IS WHAT THE Sovereign LORD says: "These are the boundaries by which you are to divide the land for an inheritance among the twelve tribes of Israel, with two portions for Joseph. ¹⁴You are to divide it equally among them. Because I swore with uplifted hand to give it to your forefathers, this land will become your inheritance.

15"This is to be the boundary of the land:

"On the north side it will run from the Great Sea by the Hethlon road past Lebo Hamath to Zedad, ¹⁶Berothah and Sibraim (which lies on the border between Damascus and Hamath), as far as Hazer Hatticon, which is on the border of Hauran. ¹⁷The boundary will extend from the sea to Hazar Enan, along the northern border of Damascus, with the border of Hamath to the north. This will be the north boundary.

¹⁸"On the east side the boundary will run between Hauran and Damascus, along the Jordan between Gilead and the land of Israel, to the eastern sea and as far as Tamar. This will be the east boundary.

¹⁹"On the south side it will run from Tamar as far as the waters of Meribah Kadesh, then along the Wadi of Egypt to the Great Sea. This will be the south boundary.

²⁰"On the west side, the Great Sea will be the boundary to a point opposite Lebo Hamath. This will be the west boundary.

²¹"You are to distribute this land among yourselves according to the tribes of Israel. ²²You are to allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and

for the aliens who have settled among you and who have children. You are to consider them as nativeborn Israelites; along with you they are to be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. ²³In whatever tribe the alien settles, there you are to give him his inheritance," declares the Sovereign LORD.

^{48:1}"These are the tribes, listed by name: At the northern frontier, Dan will have one portion; it will follow the Hethlon road to Lebo Hamath; Hazar Enan and the northern border of Damascus next to Hamath will be part of its border from the east side to the west side.

²"Asher will have one portion; it will border the territory of Dan from east to west.

³"Naphtali will have one portion; it will border the territory of Asher from east to west.

⁴"Manasseh will have one portion; it will border the territory of Naphtali from east to west.

5"Ephraim will have one portion; it will border the territory of Manasseh from east to west.

⁶"Reuben will have one portion; it will border the territory of Ephraim from east to west.

⁷"Judah will have one portion; it will border the territory of Reuben from east to west.

8"Bordering the territory of Judah from east to west will be the portion you are to present as a special gift. It will be 25,000 cubits wide, and its length from east to west will equal one of the tribal portions; the sanctuary will be in the center of it.

⁹"The special portion you are to offer to the LORD will be 25,000 cubits long and 10,000 cubits wide. ¹⁰This will be the sacred portion for the priests. It will be 25,000 cubits long on the north side, 10,000 cubits wide on the west side, 10,000 cubits wide on the east side and 25,000 cubits long

on the south side. In the center of it will be the sanctuary of the LORD. ¹¹This will be for the consecrated priests, the Zadokites, who were faithful in serving me and did not go astray as the Levites did when the Israelites went astray. ¹²It will be a special gift to them from the sacred portion of the land, a most holy portion, bordering the territory of the Levites.

¹³"Alongside the territory of the priests, the Levites will have an allotment 25,000 cubits long and 10,000 cubits wide. Its total length will be 25,000 cubits and its width 10,000 cubits. ¹⁴They must not sell or exchange any of it. This is the best of the land and must not pass into other hands, because it is holy to the LORD.

15"The remaining area, 5,000 cubits wide and 25,000 cubits long, will be for the common use of the city, for houses and for pastureland. The city will be in the center of it ¹⁶ and will have these measurements: the north side 4,500 cubits, the south side 4,500 cubits, the east side 4,500 cubits, and the west side 4,500 cubits. ¹⁷The pastureland for the city will be 250 cubits on the north, 250 cubits on the south, 250 cubits on the east, and 250 cubits on the west. ¹⁸What remains of the area, bordering on the sacred portion and running the length of it, will be 10,000 cubits on the east side and 10,000 cubits on the west side. Its produce will supply food for the workers of the city. ¹⁹The workers from the city who farm it will come from all the tribes of Israel. ²⁰The entire portion will be a square, 25,000 cubits on each side. As a special gift you will set aside the sacred portion, along with the property of the city.

²¹"What remains on both sides of the area formed by the sacred portion and the city property will belong to the prince. It will extend eastward from

the 25,000 cubits of the sacred portion to the eastern border, and westward from the 25,000 cubits to the western border. Both these areas running the length of the tribal portions will belong to the prince, and the sacred portion with the temple sanctuary will be in the center of them. ²²So the property of the Levites and the property of the city will lie in the center of the area that belongs to the prince. The area belonging to the prince will lie between the border of Judah and the border of Benjamin.

²³"As for the rest of the tribes: Benjamin will have one portion; it will extend from the east side to the west side.

²⁴"Simeon will have one portion; it will border the territory of Benjamin from east to west.

²⁵"Issachar will have one portion; it will border the territory of Simeon from east to west.

²⁶"Zebulun will have one portion; it will border the territory of Issachar from east to west.

²⁷"Gad will have one portion; it will border the territory of Zebulun from east to west.

²⁸"The southern boundary of Gad will run south from Tamar to the waters of Meribah Kadesh, then along the Wadi of Egypt to the Great Sea.

²⁹"This is the land you are to allot as an inheritance to the tribes of Israel, and these will be their portions," declares the Sovereign LORD.

³⁰"These will be the exits of the city: Beginning on the north side, which is 4,500 cubits long, ³¹the gates of the city will be named after the tribes of Israel. The three gates on the north side will be the gate of Reuben, the gate of Judah and the gate of Levi.

32"On the east side, which is 4,500 cubits long, will be three gates: the gate of Joseph, the gate of Benjamin and the gate of Dan.

33"On the south side, which measures 4,500 cubits, will be three gates: the gate of Simeon, the gate of Issachar and the gate of Zebulun.

³⁴"On the west side, which is 4,500 cubits long, will be three gates: the gate of Gad, the gate of Asher and the gate of Naphtali.

35"The distance all around will be 18,000 cubits. "And the name of the city from that time on will be:

THE LORD IS THERE."

Original Meaning

THE FINAL SECTION of Ezekiel's book records the delineation and distribution of the renewed land, continuing the trend of the vision to move outward from the temple. The land itself is oriented around the temple, however, and so the final section of the book will return to themes that have been central throughout the vision of chapters 40–48. In the same way as chapters 40–42 presented theology in architectural form, this final section renders theological concepts in geographical form. In both formats, the concepts of space, access, and position relative to the temple are crucial.

The passage opens with the description of the boundaries of the new Promised Land (Ezek. 47:13–20). The area circumscribed is broadly similar to the original area allotted to Moses in Numbers 34:1–12, stretching from Lebo Hamath in the north to the Wadi of Egypt and Meribah Kadesh³ in the south, and from the Mediterranean in the west to the Jordan River in the east.⁴ This is a larger area of territory than was ever controlled by Israel, even at the height of the Davidic empire; however, of greater significance than its absolute size is the fact that it is the same land that God promised to Moses. In receiving this land, the people receive the fulfillment of the covenant promise.

Strikingly absent from the land to be divided is the territory in the Transjordan (east of the Jordan River), which was occupied by Israel for much of its history. This land, historically the home of Reuben, Gad, and half of the tribe of Manasseh, is no longer considered part of the Promised

Land, for the simple reason that it was not part of the original promise.⁵ Even in Numbers 34, it is evident that the Transjordanian region is not part of the Promised Land proper. Although the fact of its reception by the two and a half tribes as their inheritance is mentioned (34:14–15), it lies outside the boundaries defined for the land itself.

Similarly, in the book of Joshua there is a clear distinction between the inheritance of the nine and a half tribes in Canaan, which it terms "the LORD's land" (Josh. 22:19), and the territory of the Transjordanian tribes. In Ezekiel 48, in line with this long-standing distinction, the more radical move is made to allot all twelve of the tribes land within the boundaries of the Promised Land proper. For Ezekiel, there can be no inheritance outside the land.

Equally radical is the distribution of the land itself (47:21–23). It is to be distributed "according to the tribes of Israel," which represents a return to the premonarchic state of affairs. In place of the preexilic historic reality of two divided kingdoms, the reunited people receive the land as twelve tribes. Yet it is a return to the beginning that takes into account the intervening history, for the twelve tribes are now united under a single "prince" (48:21).

Further, there is to be an inheritance in the land not merely for the native-born Israelite and his children but also for the resident alien ($g\bar{e}r$) and his children. In earlier Old Testament legislation, the $g\bar{e}r$ was considered consistently in need of special protection as part of a powerless class, subject to exploitation (Lev. 19:33). Because the $g\bar{e}r$ did not own land, he did not have the rights of full citizenship. But although socially a second-class citizen, the $g\bar{e}r$ was able to participate fully in religious affairs if he chose to do so. If he and his household were circumcised, he could partake of the Passover meal (Ex. 12:48), and he could present sacrifices to the Lord just like a native-born Israelite (Lev. 22:18). This provision recognized the fact that some resident aliens in Israel were proselytes, who had relocated for religious rather than economic reasons. The status of these proselytes is confirmed by Ezekiel through the allocation to them also of a hereditary portion in the renewed land. Given the significance of the land in Ezekiel 40–48, this is high privilege indeed.

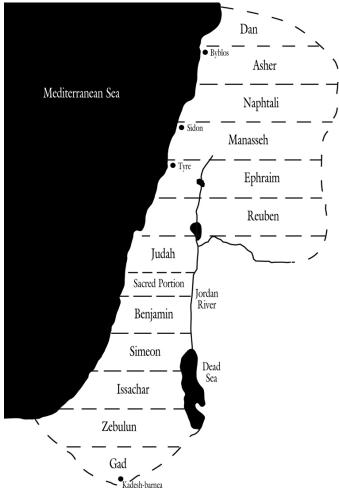


Figure 3. Ezekiel's Re(Vision) of the Land of Israel

In chapter 48, the prophet moves on to the division of the land itself among the tribes. Each of the twelve tribes is assigned an equal portion (47:14), running in a strip from east to west. This is not merely a fair way of dividing a country whose major topographic features run from north to south. It is far more fundamentally a way of orientating the entire land along the sacred east-west axis of the temple. The tribal strips themselves are left dimensionally undefined, with the borders between the tribes unmarked by geographic indicators. Only the central sacred portion has dimensions that are minutely recorded.

This contrasts dramatically with the division of the land in Joshua 14–21, whose roots are in historical rather than theological geography, where the boundaries between the different tribes are clearly defined. However, it corresponds exactly with the trend within the temple complex itself to define precisely the areas within the most holy zone, while leaving the outer

areas less completely defined.⁸ Holy space is important, so it must be completely defined. Profane space is less significant and may therefore have blurred edges.

The arrangement of the tribes within the land is not a random process. The number twelve is maintained, even though the tribe of Levi has no portion of its own, by treating the two half-tribes descended from Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh) as tribes in their own right, as in the original division of the land (Ezek. 47:13). The four tribes most distant from the sacred zone, and therefore in the position of least honor, are Dan, Asher, Naphtali, and Gad, the sons of Jacob's concubines, Zilpah and Bilhah (48:1–3, 27–28). The eight sons of Jacob's wives, Rachel and Leah, take the four strips immediately to the north and the four to the south of the sacred zone (48:4–7, 23–26).9 Of these, Benjamin and Judah, historically located immediately to the north and south of Jerusalem, are immediately north and south of the sacred zone (48:7, 23). Their historical order has been reversed, moving Judah to the north of the sacred reservation while Benjamin is on the south. This may be due to a desire to stress the integration of the new nation. No longer are they "north" and "south," "Israel" and "Judah"; now Judah itself, the royal nation, is part of the north.¹⁰

It should also be noted that the site of the temple itself seems to have migrated north in Ezekiel's vision. Given that the tribal strips are equal (47:14) and that there are seven to the north of the sacred reservation and five to the south, the site of the temple ought in strict geographical terms to be located somewhere close to Shiloh, thirty miles north of its old location." Although the vision (perhaps surprisingly) does not explicitly identify the location of the heart of the sacred portion within the renewed Israel, it would not be surprising to find that Ezekiel envisaged a change in place for the sanctuary. Given his radical assessment of the defilement of the temple's former home in Jerusalem, a location in the heartland of the old traditions, such as Shiloh, may well have proved attractive. Yet the shift in theological geography may also have been driven by a simple desire to locate the temple closer to the center of the land, in the midst of the people, while still (in deference to history) slightly south of center.

The sacred portion is certainly the spiritual center of the land (48:8–22; for the layout, see Fig. 2). Its importance is indicated not only by its physically central location and detailed dimensions but, in literary terms, by

the amount of attention devoted to it. Whereas the other tribal portions can be taken up and dismissed in a single verse, the sacred portion receives no fewer than fifteen verses. The sacred strip is 25,000 cubits (almost eight miles) wide and extends across the breadth of the land (48:8). At its heart is a 25,000-cubit square, which is itself comprised of three east-west strips, two of 10,000 cubits breadth and one of 5,000 cubits.

The first of these 10,000-cubit strips is assigned to the Zadokite priests (48:10–11). It is (lit.) "a sacred portion within the sacred portion of the land" (48:12), a kind of Holy of Holies for the land. Within it is the sanctuary itself, which the priestly land surrounds as a buffer of holiness. The second 10,000-cubit strip, which most commentators locate to the north of the priestly portion, is allocated to the Levites (48:13). It too is privileged ground, "the best of the land" (48:14), and must not be sold into other hands.

The remaining 5,000-cubit strip along the southern edge of the sacred portion is the location of "the city" (48:15–19). The city, which occupies a 4,500-cubit (1.5 mile) square, is surrounded by a 250-cubit perimeter of pasture land and flanked by two strips of land stretching east and west for food production. In this way, the "holy" square shape is maintained in the middle of an east-west oriented strip. The city functions as a visible symbol and focus of the unity of the tribes, inhabited and maintained by workers from all of the tribes (48:19).

Flanking the square sacred portion on both sides and occupying the remainder of the sacred strip is the land belonging to the prince ($n\bar{a}s\,\hat{i}$, 48:21–22). This is land of an intermediate level of holiness. It is part of the sacred strip but not part of the central square. It is defined in one direction (25,000 cubits broad) but relatively undefined in the other (extending "to the eastern border" and "to the western border"). The purpose of this land is not the focus here. Rather, in this context it serves to indicate the prince's status: He ranks above the ordinary lay members of the tribes of Israel, yet below the priests and Levites. The entire land is assigned to God's people on the basis of a graded hierarchy, in exactly the same way (and with the same gradations) as was the temple itself.

The closing verses of the book (48:30–35) bring us back to contemplate the city and some of the major themes of the vision of chapters 40–48. The prophet notes the exits of the city, recalling 43:11, where the prophet was

instructed to bring to the attention of the people the entrances and exits of the temple. Like the temple, the city is a precisely measured square. With its twelve gates, named for the twelve tribes of Israel (this time including Levi and counting Ephraim and Manasseh as one tribe, Joseph), the city functions as a visible focus of the unity of the restored people.

Yet the city is not an end in itself: It faces north, toward the temple, the center of the renewed land. For that reason, the north wall and north gates are described first and assigned to the favored tribes of Reuben, Judah, and Levi, the three most significant tribes descended from Leah. The other three tribes descended from Leah (Simeon, Issachar, and Zebulun) are assigned the southern gates. The gates to the east are the tribes descended from Rachel (Joseph and Benjamin) and one from her servant Bilhah (Dan), while the least-favored west gates are assigned to Gad, Asher, and Naphtali, descendants of the concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah (48:34). ¹⁴

Finally, the city is given a new name, reflecting the focus of the entire temple vision: "THE LORD IS THERE" (*yahweh šāmmâ*, 48:35). At first sight, this seems to conflict with the earlier assertion that God is present in his temple, which has been separated from the city by a priestly buffer zone, protecting its holiness. However, the language of God's dual presence is necessary in order to communicate both God's transcendence and his immanence.¹⁵

Both of these themes have been developed in Ezekiel 40–48: The high walls of the temple underline God's transcendent presence in the midst of God's people but separate from them, while the river of life speaks of God's immanent presence for blessing in the midst of his people. Similarly, God's transcendence is emphasized in the separation of the temple from the city, while at the same time his immanence is asserted by the sacred shape given to the city and its new name, "THE LORD IS THERE."

Temple and city are where Ezekiel 40–48 started out (40:2), and they are where the vision ends. Both are transformed versions of the defiled and destroyed earthly institutions. In place of the earthly temple, contaminated by the sins of the people and abandoned by the presence of God (chs. 8–11), Ezekiel has seen an undefiled temple, refilled by God's glory (chs. 40–43). In place of an adulterous city named Jerusalem, which is put to death on account of her sins, Ezekiel has seen a holy city named "THE LORD IS THERE," the habitat of the twelve renewed tribes of Israel. In place of a

devastated land, Ezekiel has seen a land of peace and prosperity, watered by the river of life. In short, Ezekiel's entire temple vision is the unfolding of his earlier prophecy:

I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. (37:26–27)

Bridging Contexts

THEOLOGY IN THE FORM of geography. The perspective of 47:13–48:35 is a modified utopianism. It is utopian in that it is a document whose message is drawn in broad strokes, setting out a better future in direct contrast to the past and to the existing state of affairs, without addressing the means whereby such change is to be brought about. Only the intervention of the Lord can bring about these changes. Yet it is not pure utopianism, since this Promised Land is not located somewhere over the rainbow, in a land where dreams come true. Redemption for Israel will take place not in an emerald city at the end of the yellow brick road, but rather in the land of Israel, which the Lord swore to give to the patriarchs.

In Ezekiel's vision, the past history of Israel is not abolished or ignored, with a return to some "perfect" earlier point in history. Rather, it is reformed and brought to its intended fulfillment. Thus, even though the land is divided among the twelve tribes, there is still room for a reformed monarchy in the figure of the prince. The historical "accidents" of birth are not abolished but continue to play a role in the location of the twelve tribes. This does not mean that we should therefore anticipate a "literal" future fulfillment of this chapter, any more than of the temple of Ezekiel 40–42. This section is "theology in the form of geography," just as the earlier depiction was theology in the form of architecture.

However, it is the history of promise and fulfillment that provides the background for the future hope. The God who covenanted with Abraham, who brought the twelve tribes out of Egypt, who provided the rebels with life-giving water at Meribah Kadesh, is the same God who will graciously

restore the rebels of Ezekiel's day and provide for them life-giving water. The goal of chapters 40–48 is to encourage repentance, faithfulness, and hope: repentance over the sins of the past, faithfulness in the difficult present, and hope for a brighter future through God's grace.¹⁸

The book of Ezekiel in the light of the book of Revelation. Given this genre, how shall we appropriate the message of Ezekiel 40–48 in our very different situation? The best answer is to look again at how the New Testament appropriates its message. The book of Revelation adopts the central thrust of Ezekiel's vision, yet transforms it in important ways in the light of the fulfillment of the old covenant in Christ. The city that John sees is no longer called "THE LORD IS THERE" but "the new Jerusalem" (Rev. 21:2). That is certainly not because the Lord is not there in the new Jerusalem, but rather because Babylon has taken over from Jerusalem the role of the anti-heavenly city in Revelation. The city still has twelve gates with the names of the twelve tribes on them (21:12), but added to that are twelve foundations for the walls inscribed with the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb (21:14).

Most strikingly, the city has no temple, not because the temple is sited elsewhere as in Ezekiel's vision, but because the Lord God and the Lamb are its temple (Rev. 21:22). Moreover, John's new Jerusalem is substantially larger than Ezekiel's, comprising a cube with sides 1,400 miles long, rather than a square with sides about eight miles long. In other words, the new Jerusalem is not a literal fulfillment of Ezekiel's vision but a creative appropriation of its central themes for the different situation of the early church.

The fundamental theme of Ezek. 47:13–48:35 is inheritance. For the landless people to whom Ezekiel's vision is communicated, the commitment is made that God's promise to Abraham and Isaac and to Moses will be fulfilled. God's people will ultimately possess the land as an inheritance for themselves and their descendants and the resident aliens, those whom God calls out from the nations to join them. They will finally enter their rest. The rest that the people of Joshua's day sought in vain in their conquest of the land will one day become a reality.

According to the New Testament it becomes a reality not through the reoccupation of the physical territory of Israel that Ezekiel has described but through a spiritual appropriation of the heavenly reality to which the

land of Canaan always pointed. "Entering God's rest" is begun in this present age by faith (Heb. 3:18–19; 4:2–3), specifically faith in Christ, the One who came to bring rest to the "weary and burdened" (Matt. 11:28). Those who inherit the land in New Testament terminology are the meek (5:5), the sheep gathered from all nations (25:32–34). Those who will inherit are those who overcome in Christ, not simply those who may be physically descended from Abraham (Rev. 21:7). The land they seek to inherit does not stretch from Lebo Hamath to the Wadi of Egypt, like that of Ezekiel's vision. Rather, they seek the reality that Abraham sought and that Ezekiel tried to describe—the heavenly "city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10).

Contemporary Significance

THE VERTICAL DIMENSION. Does the person who dies with the most toys win? To the Israelites in exile, the temptation to think so was real. What significance could God and his ancient promise of a land of their own have to a people who felt abandoned by him and who had been exiled from his land? Why not just assimilate into the local culture and live to accumulate toys? Ezekiel's answer is to point the exiles up to God's heavenly temple and back to God's promises to Moses that Abraham's descendants would indeed inherit the land of Canaan.

Many people in the world in which we live are similarly driven by the desire to own and possess a significant slice of this world's action. In part, this is a natural response to the loss of a vertical dimension in their lives. Robbed of spiritual significance, what else is there for people to live for than material possessions? If our treasure is not stored up in heaven, where else shall we put it other than on the earth?

In the Beatitudes, Jesus points Christians in a different direction. Instead of envying and imitating the lifestyles of the rich and famous, Christians are to envy and emulate the meek, who act humbly and gently toward others based on a true estimate of their own standing before God (Matt. 5:5). ¹⁹ But why are the meek so blessed? Why should we envy their lifestyle so much and seek to imitate them? Because, according to Jesus, it is they who "will inherit the land."

Most English translations today render Jesus' words in the form that has become proverbial, "The meek will inherit the earth," but that translation obscures what it is that Jesus is promising. Jesus is here quoting from Psalm 37:11, which says, "The meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace." "Land" gets across what he is driving at far better than "earth," because it carries overtones of God's promise to Israel, which spoke of a land that may only be possessed spiritually.²⁰ As the philosopher Nietzsche and the pop group "Tears for Fears" each expressed in their own way, "Everybody wants to rule the world"; but only those who are spiritual long for God's land. Just as God promised Abraham to give his descendants a spiritual land of their own, Jesus extends that same promise to the meek, those who are the citizens of his new kingdom.

But the meek will not invade the land. They will not overpower the land. They will not overrun the land because of their great might. They will *inherit* the land. It is God's gift to them, not the fruit of their own efforts. So it is with the temple-centered land of Ezekiel's vision. It is not offered to the rich and powerful, on sale for those who can afford its hefty price tag. Nor is it a program to be implemented by God's people to bring about heaven on earth, after their return from exile. The land they are to seek is a heavenly land, which they are to pursue by faith, just as did their ancestor Abraham (Heb. 11:8–10).

We then, as Christians, look upward and onward to our Promised Land, just as Ezekiel did. We look forward to a future city with foundations, a place where God will dwell in our midst and will wipe away all of our tears. We look forward to a place where suffering and sin will be no more, where all of God's children will be arrayed around the throne, inheriting the spiritual blessings that are ours in Christ.

Danger! The danger for Israel throughout the Old Testament was that they would become more attached to the earth than to the land, more interested in settling down and owning property than in seeking after God. That danger applies similarly to us, for we too can become more interested in possessing the earth, or at least a little part of it, than in inheriting the land. We long more for a rich, comfortable, easy life than for a dynamic spiritual walk with the Lord and a powerful witness to his glory and grace. As pastors, we want to build large, successful churches that will free us

from the messiness of one-on-one pastoral ministry and enable us to bask in our achievements.

But that is not the way it should be for Christians! "Here we do not have an enduring city" (Heb. 13:14). This world is not our home; we are simply exiles here, resident aliens, whose hearts are elsewhere. This world's judgment on us is not what counts. What counts is God's judgment on us and the glorious inheritance that he in his mercy and grace has stored up for us.

As we wait, we are to live lives completely centered on the new covenant temple, Jesus himself (Heb. 12:22–28). Such lives revolve around the powerful worship of the awe-inspiring God, the living presence in our hearts of Jesus Christ our King, and the life-giving activity of his Spirit in our lives. So nourished, we are empowered to take the gospel out to all the nations of the earth. The inheritance that is ours in Christ is offered not simply to the twelve historic tribes of Israel, nor even to those who are resident aliens in their midst, but to all to whom the Word of God comes. As Peter put it on the day of Pentecost: "The promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39).

Thus, the nations will be brought in from the north and south and east and west and will sit down to feast with one another in the heavenly city, and the Lord of hosts and the Lamb will be there in their midst. Then indeed the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem, will fittingly bear the name that Ezekiel ascribed to it, *yahweh šāmmâ*, "THE LORD IS THERE."

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Notes

- 1. Jerome, Ep. ad Paulinam, 8.
- 2. b. hag. 13a.
- 3. b. šabb. 13b.
- 4. b. Menah. 45a.
- 5. On the history of the Assyrian empire, see William C. Gwaltney Jr., "Assyrians," in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, ed. A. J. Hoerth, G. L. Mattingly, and E. M. Yamauchi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 77–106.
- 6. James B. Pritchard, ed., Ancient Near Eastern Texts, 2d ed. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1955), 288.
- 7. Daniel I. Block, Ezekiel 1–24 (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 3.
- 8. John Bright, A History of Israel, 3d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 327.
- ANET, 283, 288. On the Assyrian deportations, see Bustenai Oded, Mass Deportations and Deportees in the Neo-Assyrian Empire (Wiesbaden: L. Reichert, 1979), and K. Lawson Younger Jr., "The Deportations of the Israelites," JBL 117 (1998): 201–27.
- 10. Bright, A History of Israel, 344-45.
- 11. BZAW 39; Giessen: Töpelmann, 1924).
- 12. For an evaluation of these yardsticks of originality, see Moshe Greenberg, "What Are Valid Criteria for Determining Inauthentic Matter in Ezekiel?" in *Ezekiel and His Book: Textual and Literary Criticism and Their Interrelation*, ed. J. Lust (BETL 74; Leuven: Leuven Univ. Press, 1986), 123–35.
- 13. So Jörg Garscha, Studien zum Ezechielbuch (Bern: Herbert Lang, 1974), 15.
- 14. See my Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel, 72–74.
- 15. Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20* (AB; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983), 27. For an example of Greenberg's critique of traditional critical approaches to the book, see "Note on Criteria of Authenticity: The Sidon Oracle As an Example," *Ezekiel 21–37* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 597–99.
- 16. See Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 22.
- 17. See *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, I.4 and I.5. See John Murray, "The Attestation of Scripture," in P. Woolley, ed., *The Infallible Word*, 3d ed. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967), 1–54.
- 18. The Homilies of Gregory the Great on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, trans. T. Gray (Etna, Calif.: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 1990), 179–85.
- 19. William Greenhill, An Exposition of Ezekiel (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994 reprint), 780.
- 20. Spurgeon, Lectures to My Students (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972 reprint), 97.
- 21. As Spurgeon does in his sermon on Ezekiel 47:5, "Waters to Swim in," published in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Sermons Preached and Revised in 1872*, vol. 18 (Pasadena, Tex.: Pilgrim, 1971 reprint), 313–24. By no means all of his sermons on the book of Ezekiel are allegorical, however.
- 22. The Journals of Jim Elliot (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1978), 39–40.
- 23. Dispensationalism Today (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 86.
- 24. Ibid., 87.
- 25. Edward J. Young, My Servants the Prophets (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 46-54.
- 26. See Edmund P. Clowney, Preaching and Biblical Theology (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1975), 76.
- 27. Edmund P. Clowney, "Preaching Christ From All the Scriptures," in S.T. Logan, ed., *The Preacher and Preaching* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986), 164. See also Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching:* Redeeming the Expository Sermon (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 272; Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 118–20.
- 28. Chapell, Christ-Centered Preaching, 272.
- 29. See John Newton, "On the Inefficacy of Knowledge," in *The Works of John Newton* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1985 reprint), 1:245–53.
- 30. On the power of the gospel to change lives, see C. John Miller, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 120–34. Similarly, Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1979), 95–144.
- 31. See Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church.* Volume 1: *The Biblical Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 189.

- 1. Douglas Stuart, *Ezekiel* (Dallas, Tex.: Word, 1988), 29; A. D. York, "Ezekiel 1: Inaugural and Restoration Visions?" VT 27 (1977): 82–98.
- 2. See George A. Cooke, *Ezekiel* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936), 7. In the seventeenth century, this view was advocated by William Greenhill, *An Exposition of Ezekiel* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994 reprint), 9.
- 3. So also John Calvin, Ezekiel I, trans. D. Foxgrover and D. Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 14.
- 4. For this view, see Claus von Orelli, Das Buch Ezechiel und die zwölf kleinen Propheten, 2d ed. (Munich: Beek, 1896).
- 5. J. E. Miller, "The 'Thirtieth Year' of Ezekiel 1.1," *RB* 99 (1992): 499–503; Margaret S. Odell, "You Are What You Eat: Ezekiel and the Scroll," *JBL* 117 (1998): 229–48; Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19* (WBC 28; Dallas, Tex.: Word, 1994), 21; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 16; Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 82.
- 6. On 'elōhîm as an appellative ("divinity") in this phrase rather than a proper noun, see Block, Ezekiel 1–24, 85.
- 7. "Exile and Dreams of Return," CurrTM 18 (1990): 192.
- 8. Ibid., 197.
- 9. Ibid., 198.
- 10. These causes of the sense of exile, while perhaps new to some of us, have been familiar to our brothers and sisters in the African-American and Hispanic-American community for generations. See Jean-Pierre Ruiz, "Exile History and Hope: A Hispanic Reading of Ezekiel 20," *The Bible Today* 35 (1997): 106–13.
- 11. See Ursula Pfafflin, "Displacement and the Yearning for Holding Environments: Visions in Feminist Pastoral Psychology and Theology," *Journal of Pastoral Care* 49 (1995): 391.
- 12. "An American Tune," words and music by Paul Simon; © 1973 Paul Simon (BMI).
- 13. Cited by Miroslav Volf in "Allegiance and Rebellion," The Christian Century 114 (1997): 633.



- 1. Notice the significance of "rest" as a precondition for building the temple in Deut. 12:10; 2 Sam. 7:1; 1 Chron. 22:9. See Roddy L. Braun, *1 Chronicles* (WBC 14; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1986), 224–25.
- 2. Ronald E. Clements, *Isaiah and the Deliverance of Jerusalem* (JSOTS 13; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980), 98. Clements points to this belief as a significant factor in the "confident, but ill-founded way in which the kings of Judah reacted to the constraints of outside political pressure . . . and . . . were guilty of the most crass and reckless political misjudgments."
- 3. See Iain Duguid, "Ezekiel," *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 256–57.
- 4. Robert R. Wilson, "Prophecy in Crisis: The Call of Ezekiel," *Int* 38 (1984): 125.
- 5. These wheels intersect with one another at right angles to enable the chariot to move in any direction without turning (so v. 17). See John W. Wevers, *Ezekiel* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 46.
- 6. See "Chariot," *DBI*, 139.
- 7. Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19*, 25.
- 8. This was recognized already by the rabbis, who explained: "Four kinds of proud beings were created in the world: the proudest of all—man; of birds—the eagle; of domestic animals—the bull; of wild animals—the lion; and all of them are stationed beneath the chariot of the Holy One" (*Exod. Rab.* 23.13). See Moshe Greenberg, "Ezekiel's Vision: Literary and Iconographic Aspects," in *History, Historiography and Interpretation: Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Literature*, ed. H. Tadmor and M. Weinfeld (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1983), 165.
- 9. The idea of God's setting his bow in the clouds is unique to these two passages.
- 10. For example, William Greenhill adduces from the text that "each one went straight ahead; they did not turn as they moved" (Ezek. 1:9), the application that Christians ought to mind their own business and not meddle in the affairs of others (*Ezekiel*, 39). Similarly, Gregory the Great identified the four faces of the living creatures with the four Evangelists (*Homilies on the Book of Ezekiel*, 4.1). In this, he may have been influenced by the earlier identification of the four (separate) living creatures of Rev. 4 with the gospel writers by Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* 3.11.8) and Victorinus (*Comm. in Apoc.* 4.3–4). In each case, the application is arbitrary rather than growing out of an understanding of the text in its original context.
- 11. Other images from Ezek. 1 appear in the vision of the heavenly throne room in Rev. 4: a throne on a surface like crystal, four living creatures covered with eyes, and partaking of the likeness of a lion, an eagle, an ox, and a human being. Yet along with the similarities there are also differences. The "expanse" (rāqîa') becomes a "sea of glass," the living creatures now each have the likeness of one kind of animal instead of each having the faces of all four, and now they have six wings (like Isaiah's seraphim) instead of four. The eyes have moved from the wheels (which have disappeared) onto the living creatures themselves.
- 12. "The Seeker Service at Fair Haven," Reformed Worship 23 (1992): 10.

- 1. This identification of Israel with the paradigm of rebellion, the "nations" (*gôyim*; e.g., Ps. 2:1), probably explains the unexpected plural here.
- 2. Compare with the opening chapter of Hosea, where Israel has become "Not my people" ($l\bar{o}$ -'ammî, Hos. 1:9). Similarly, in Ex. 32:7–14, after the sin with the golden calf, God sends Moses back to "your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt" (v. 7, reflecting Israel's self-identification in v. 1); the resolution to the crisis is not reached until the Lord relents and does not bring the threatened disaster upon "his people" (v. 14).
- 3. Moshe Greenberg, Ezekiel 1–20 (AB; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983), 62.
- 4. "'The primary sense of *mārad* is refuse allegiance to, rise up against, a sovereign'; its antonym is *ābad* 'serve, be subject to'" (Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 63).
- 5. There is a play on the prophet's name here, for Ezekiel means "God strengthens." See John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel* (TOTC; Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1969), 66.
- 6. Thus John Skinner would translate ben-ādām simply by "member of the human race," arguing that "it expresses the infinite contrast between the heavenly and the earthly, between the glorious Being who speaks from the throne and the frail creature who needs to be supernaturally strengthened before he can stand upright in the attitude of service" (*The Book of Ezekiel* [The Expositor's Bible; New York: Armstrong & Son, 1895], 44).
- 7. "What the entire people should achieve is to be realized in the one son of man who is their representative" (Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, trans. C. Quin [OTL; London: SCM, 1970], 64). For the connection between Ezek. 37 and Gen. 2:7, see Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel*, 173.
- 8. Compare Ezek. 36:26–27.
- 9. This may be the reason why the metaphor of Jer. 15:16 has become a concrete experience for Ezekiel.
- Ernst W. Hengstenberg, The Prophecies of Ezekiel Elucidated, trans. A. C. & J. G. Murphy (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1874), 37.
- 11. The Hebrew word translated "overwhelmed" (mašmîm) comes from the root šāmam, which occurs frequently throughout Ezekiel in the sense of "devastate, ravage, make desolate."
- 12. Odell, "Ezekiel and the Scroll," 244.
- 13. William J. Dumbrell, "Spirit and Kingdom of God in the Old Testament," *Reformed Theological Review* 33 (1974): 1–10.
- 14. See Bruce Chilton, "The Son of Man—Who Was He?" Bible Review 12 (1996): 34-46.
- 15. Reversed Thunder (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 30.
- 16. Ezekiel I, 61.
- 17. John Piper, Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 14-15.
- 18. Exposition of Ezekiel, 79.



- 1. Odell, "Ezekiel and the Scroll," 231.
- 2. So Gerhard von Rad, Old Testament Theology, 2 vols. (New York: Harper, 1962, 1965), 2:231.
- 3. Greenberg, Ezekiel 1–20, 95.
- 4. On the concepts of "life" and "death," see Walther Zimmerli, "'Leben' und 'Tod' im Buche des Propheten Ezechiel," *ThZ* 13 (1957): 494–508.
- 5. Compare 2 Sam. 4:11–13. See Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 85.
- 6. Nicholas Tromp, "The Paradox of Ezekiel's Prophetic Mission: Towards a Semiotic Approach of Ezekiel 3:22–27," in *Ezekiel and His Book: Textual and Literary Criticism and Their Interrelation*, ed. J. Lust (BETL 74; Leuven: Leuven Univ. Press, 1986), 209.
- 7. Derek Thomas, *God Strengthens: Ezekiel Simply Explained* (Welwyn Commentary Series; Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1993), 40.
- 8. Commentators have disagreed over whether the dumbness allows intermittent speech at the divine command (so Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 102) or is total until its lifting at the fall of Jerusalem, foretold in Ezek. 24:27 (so Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, trans. R. E. Clements, 2 vols. [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979], 1:160). At issue is the question of whether the "when I speak to you" of 3:27 has a repetitive sense ("whenever") or a momentary sense ("at the time when"). In favor of Greenberg's view is the parallel construction in 3:18, which undeniably has an iterative sense.

- 9. Ellen F. Davis comments: "Ezekiel must fall 'silent' and let the scroll which he has swallowed speak through him" (Swallowing the Scroll: Textuality and the Dynamics of Discourse in Ezekiel's Prophecy [JSOTS 78; Sheffield: Almond, 1989], 52).
- 10. For the evidence for the *môkîaḥ* as an arbitrator or mediator between the two parties involved in a legal case, see Robert R. Wilson, "An Interpretation of Ezekiel's Dumbness," *VT* 22 (1972): 99–101. So also Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 157.
- 11. Systematic Theology, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 361.
- 12. See, for instance, Gen. 20:7, where it is the fact that Abraham is a prophet that qualifies him to intercede on Abimelech's behalf.
- 13. David Halperin, Seeking Ezekiel: Text and Psychology (State College, Pa.: Pennsylvania State Univ., Press, 1993).
- 14. Odell, "Ezekiel and the Scroll," 245.
- 15. Maurice E. Andrew, Responsibility and Restoration: The Course of the Book of Ezekiel (Dunedin: Univ. of Otago Press, 1985), 26.
- 16. The Journals of Jim Elliot (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1978), 174.



- 1. According to Kurt Galling, ancient Near Eastern bricks had dimensions ranging from 6" to 13–1/2" wide and 10" to 24" long ("Ziegel," *Biblisches Reallexikon*, ed. K. Galling, 2d ed. [Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1977], 364).
- 2. Compare the comments on Ezekiel's dumbness above.
- 3. At least to understand, though not to perform! For this reason, many older interpreters viewed it as a purely visionary action that was never actually performed (e.g., Calvin, *Ezekiel I*, 116; Skinner, *Ezekiel*, 65; Patrick Fairbairn, *An Exposition of Ezekiel* [Grand Rapids: Sovereign Grace, 1971 reprint], 25). More recent commentators, stressing the public nature of sign-acts, tend to play down the difficulty by imagining the prophet as performing it on a part-time basis (e.g., Taylor, *Ezekiel*, 81; Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19*, 67; Kelvin G. Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts: Their Meaning and Function As Nonverbal Communication and Rhetoric* [Ph.D. diss.; Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin, 1989], 546).
- 4. Ezekiel 1–20, 106.
- 5. This is perhaps what explains the reading of 190 years instead of 390 years found in the LXX. See Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 1:167.
- 6. For an example, see Greenberg, Ezekiel 1–20, 105.
- 7. The exact dates are variously rendered, depending on whether you start from the exile of 598 B.C. or that of 586 B.C.; however, the import is clear.
- 8. Cf. Ezek. 25:3; see Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19*, 68.
- 9. Compare the same period predicted for the exile of the Egyptians in Ezek. 29:12–13.
- 10. Compare the similar ideas expressed in Ezek. 20:35–36.
- 11. Stuart, Ezekiel, 58.
- 12. The process by which significant actions in the present can create the future by "pre-enacting" it. An example would be the voodoo practice of sticking pins into a model of a person in the belief that thereby real hurt will be caused to the person concerned.
- 13. For the former see von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:96–97; Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 1:156; for the latter, Bernhard Lang, "Street Theater, Raising the Dead, and the Zoroastrian Connection in Ezekiel's Prophecy," in *Ezekiel and His Book*, 305.
- 14. W. David Stacey has objected that many of the prophetic sign-acts took place in private; for instance, Ezekiel's eating of the scroll (*Prophetic Drama in the Old Testament* [London: Epworth, 1990], 265). However, the public recounting of the sign-act performed in private immediately makes it a public act.
- 15. Ezekiel 1–19, 66.
- 16. For this use of "affections," see Jonathan Edwards, A Treatise on the Religious Affections (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1986 reprint), 25.
- 17. Westminster Confession of Faith, 27.1
- 18. So Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 1:28.
- 19. See Lang's comments on the ability of sign-acts to gain a hearing for a potentially unpopular message ("Street Theater," 301).
- 20. Arnold Dallimore, The Life of George Whitefield (Westchester, Ill.: Cornerstone, 1980), 2:388.
- 21. Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), 8.
- 22. H. David Schuringa, Hearing the Word in a Visual Age (Ph.D. diss., Kampen, 1995), 220-32.
- 23. Dan G. McCartney, Why Does It Have to Hurt? The Meaning of Christian Suffering (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1998), 60.

24. Twice in full (Acts 10:10–16; 11:5–10) and once in summary 15:7–9 (I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* [TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], 181).



- 1. Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 193.
- 2. Henning G. Reventlow, Wächter über Israel: Ezechiel und seine Tradition (BZAW 82; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1962), 25–26.
- 3. It is tempting to read Ezekiel's iron pan against the background of Lev. 26:19, which speaks of the heavens becoming like iron to the covenant breakers. Though in the original context in Leviticus the iron heavens are joined to earth of brass, suggesting that drought is the curse intended, Ezekiel may have taken up the imagery and reapplied it in concrete form, much as he does with Isaiah's hired razor, to symbolize the closing of the lines of communication between humankind and God
- 4. In both cases lit., "breaking the staff of bread." For an explanation of this phrase in terms of the practice of carrying ringshaped loaves on a pole, see H. Schult, "Marginalie zum 'Stab des Brotes," ZDPV 87 (1971): 206–8.
- 5. Ronald E. Clements, God and Temple (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 49–50.
- 6. Block, Ezekiel 1–24, 217.
- 7. For a brief analysis of the Hittite treaty form, see Delbert R. Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1969), 27–39.
- 8. 8. O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 271–300.
- 9. Though the original reference is only to the book of Revelation, it forms a fitting conclusion to the New Testament and the Bible as a whole. See Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 37.
- 10. Meredith G. Kline, Kingdom Prologue (priv. publ., 1991), 28.



- 1. Note the explicit connection between Ezek. 5:17, "I will bring the sword against you," and 6:3, "I am about to bring a sword against you" (Thomas Renz, *The Rhetorical Function of the Book of Ezekiel* [Ph.D. diss., Cheltenham and Gloucester College/Univ. of Bristol, 1997], 52).
- 2. See Lawrence Boadt, "Rhetorical Strategies in Ezekiel's Oracles of Judgment," in Ezekiel and His Book, 188.
- 3. So Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19*, 86.
- 4. Cf. Isa. 14:25; 65:9. See Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 1:185.
- 5. Patrick H. Vaughn, *The Meaning of 'bāmâ' in the Old Testament: A Study of Etymological, Textual and Archaeological Evidence* (SOTSMS 3; London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1974), 29–55.
- 6. Most English translations render this word as "incense altars." However, evidence from an Aramaic temple foundation inscription that equates hmn' with naos suggests that they should rather be understood as sanctuaries of some kind. See H. J. W. Drijvers, "Aramaic hmn' and Hebrew hmn: Their Meaning and Root," JSS 33 (1988): 174; Block, Ezekiel 1–24, 225–26.
- 7. See 2 Kings 23:4–7. Those ministering at the high places of Josiah's day apparently included Yahwistic priests ($k\bar{o}h^anim$; 23:9) as well as pagan priests ($k^em\bar{a}rim$; 23:5), so there was evidently syncretism as well as outright pagan idolatry. Recent archaeological discoveries from the eighth century B.C. also support the picture of syncretistic worship. On these, see William G. Dever, "Asherah, Consort of Yahweh? New Evidence From Kuntillet 'Ajrûd," *BASOR* 255 (1984): 21–37, and Ziony Zevit, "The Khirbet el-Qôm Inscription Mentioning a Goddess," *BASOR* 255 (1984): 39–47.
- 8. Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19*, 87.
- 9. See W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Sacred Dance: A Study in Comparative Folklore* (Cambridge: Cambridge. Univ. Press, 1923), 88; Robert Burrelli, "Dance and Related Expressions of Worship" (unpub. Th.M. thesis; Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary), 16. A similar ritual seems to have developed as part of the later Lulab Festival at the Feast of Tabernacles (*m. Sukka* 4:5).
- 10. Again, an element of heightening from the previous chapter, where it occurs only once (Ezek. 5:13).
- 11. See Walther Zimmerli, "The Recognition of God According to the Book of Ezekiel," in *I Am Yahweh*, ed. W. Brueggemann, trans. D. Stuart (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 29–98.
- 12. Cf. the title of one of his books, He Is There and He Is Not Silent (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972).
- 13. See Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 1:189.

- 14. The Hebrew of Ezek. 6:9 is difficult; various suggestions have been made to emend the text to read, "I have broken their adulterous heart and eyes," rather than the MT, "I have been broken [by?] their adulterous heart and eyes" (see Allen, Ezekiel 1–19, 83). Perhaps the difficulty has been caused by an attempt to link this verse with the destruction of vv. 4, 6, so that the Lord is in effect saying, "I have been broken [nišbartî = grieved] by the judgment necessary to break their adultery in which their altars will be broken [nišberû; v. 6]"; as we would put it, "This is hurting me as much as it is hurting you."
- 15. Reading "Riblah" for MT "Diblah"—the consonants "r" and "d" were easily confused in Hebrew. Riblah is a city in the Syrian territory of Hamath, north of Israel. It is not the normal northern boundary of Israel, which was at Lebo Hamath (Ezek. 47:16; 48:1); it was perhaps chosen because of its associations with the exiling of Jehoahaz after Josiah's defeat and death (2 Kings 23:33), which made it a suitable place of judgment (Cooke, *Ezekiel*, 73).
- 16. Daniel Bodi, "Les *gillûlîm* chez Ézéchiel et dans l'Ancien Testament, et les différentes pratiques cultuelles associées à ce terme," *RB* 100 (1993): 481–510.
- 17. Block uses graphic terminology in Ezekiel 1–24, 226.
- 18. Gordon J. Wenham, "The Religion of the Patriarchs," in *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, ed. A. R. Millard and D. J. Wiseman (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1980), 184.
- 19. The tendency to view one's country as an elect nation (or worse, the elect nation) is an unfortunate tendency within Puritan thought in general (see Leland Ryken, Worldly Saints: The Puritans As They Really Were [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986], 198). The sense of unique destiny was amplified in the American context by the circumstances behind the founding of the New England colonies, such that they viewed themselves as "a city set upon an hill . . . a people in covenant with God." From there, the idea of "manifest destiny" spread more widely into the American consciousness, along with other (more positive) aspects of Puritan thought. The notion of national covenants with God is also found in certain strands of British, and especially Scottish, theological thought, particularly among those strongly influenced by the Puritans.
- 20. "Son of a bitch" retains the canine reference but has perhaps become too commonplace an insult in general society. However, if you translate it into the context of the pulpit, its shocking force is perhaps still present.
- 21. Lesslie Newbigin, The Gospel in a Pluralist Society (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 15-16.
- 22. Stephen Covey lists a number of possible "personal centers" that can be helpful both in diagnosing personal idolatries and in helping unchurched people understand the concept of idolatry (*The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989], 118–25). Covey's answer to these "personal centers" is a life that is "principle centered," and he goes on to advise on how to write a mission statement that will clarify one's own principles. From a Christian perspective, this may well end up merely replacing one "ineffective" idolatry with a more "effective" one, that of "principles." Any center other than the true and living God, who has revealed himself in the Scriptures, is idolatry. Of course, assisting people to manufacture effective idolatries sells books.
- 23. The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 1–2.
- 24. Ezekiel I, 156.



- 1. Ezekiel 1–20, 161. For that reason, this translation is to be preferred to that of the NIV: "four corners of the land."
- 2. Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 1:204.
- 3. This translation of $s^e p \bar{t} r \hat{a}$ is widely accepted by commentators; however, it is only "a guess based on the context" (Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 148). Block prefers the translation, "The leash has gone forth," seeing $s^e p \bar{t} r \hat{a}$ as a reference to the chains in which Judah will be led into captivity (*Ezekiel 1–24*, 252, 254).
- 4. Greenberg, Ezekiel 1-20, 158.
- 5. Block, Ezekiel 1-24, 146.
- 6. This word often has military connotations (BDB, 242c).
- 7. The Hebrew reads lit., "Every knee will go (or flow) water," which the NIV, along with most other English versions, renders as "every knee will become as weak as water." However, most modern commentators understand "water" as urine in this context, a view that goes back to the LXX. The intended referent is not loss of strength but rather loss of bladder control. For the ancient Near Eastern comparative evidence, see Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 152.
- 8. The phrase 'am hā'āreş can either cover a rather general group of people or, as here, a specific political grouping closely linked to the Davidic monarchy. See Shemaryahu Talmon, "The Judean hā'āreş in Historical Perspective," in King, Cult and Calendar in Ancient Israel: Collected Studies (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1986), 68–78.
- 9. The balance between these two triads suggests that there is no reason to collapse the two references to king (*melek*) and prince ($n\bar{a}s'\hat{i}$) into a single person. Although Ezekiel frequently uses $n\bar{a}s'\hat{i}$ to refer to the reigning monarch, that preference is not absolute. For a defense of the present text, see Duguid, *Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel*, 21.

- 10. The quotation is attributed to the nineteenth-century German author, Heinrich Heine.
- 11. The language is that of *The Book of Common Prayer*, "Collect for Communion."
- 12. Ezekiel I, 188.
- 13. New York: MacMillan, 1946.
- 14. For an extended example of how this can be done, see Thomas Boston's classic *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1964 reprint). This book describes the original situation of the human race in the state of innocence before the Fall, the post-Fall situation apart from Christ, the Christian's present situation in this world, and finally a description of one's final state in heaven or hell. The material originated as sermons that were preached to a rural community in eighteenth-century Scotland and therefore represents a pastorally motivated rather than a doctrinally motivated presentation.



- 1. The period is understood as completed by including the 40 days within the 390 or assuming an intercalatory month (Taylor, *Ezekiel*, 80); however, there seems no objection to the vision taking place within the period of the sign-act (Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 166).
- 2. According to Jer. 28, in the fourth year of Zedekiah's reign the prophet Hananiah had declared that within two years the Babylonian yoke would be broken, while the captives and the temple treasures would be returned. If this oracle was known among the exiles, the fact that the clock was running down to zero on this prophecy may have prompted some expectation of imminent help.
- 3. In Ezek. 14:1; 20:1 they are called "the elders of Israel," not "the elders of Judah." But the two expressions are in many cases virtually synonymous in Ezekiel. Notice, for instance, how the charges in Ezek. 8 implicate both the house of Israel (8:6, 10–12) and the house of Judah (8:17). Indeed, the summary statement of 9:9 indicts "the house of Israel and Judah." See Walther Zimmerli, "Israel im Buche Ezechiel," VT 8 (1958): 82.
- 4. Halperin, Seeking Ezekiel, 58.
- 5. The NIV translation "to the entrance to the north gate of the inner court" is based on the MT. The phrase lit. translates: "to the entrance of the gate, the inner one, facing to the north." The word "inner one" is a feminine adjective that hangs oddly beside the masculine word "gate" (note that the participle "facing" is masculine); "inner one" is not attested by the LXX, and it disturbs the general flow of the chapter from outer parts inward (as in chs. 40–43) and should therefore be omitted. See Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 1:217.
- 6. The only other place in the Old Testament where an "incense burner" (*miqteret*) is found is in 2 Chron. 26:19, where Uzziah is similarly convicted of cultic irregularities.
- 7. Martin Schmidt, Prophet und Tempel (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1948), 139.
- 8. Block, Ezekiel 1-24, 293.
- 9. Schmidt, *Prophet und Tempel*, 139. This family was also closely associated with Jeremiah (Jer. 26:24; 29:3; 39:14); cf. Burke O. Long, "Social Dimensions of Prophetic Conflict," *Semeia* 21 (1982): 46.
- 10. Compare the opening vision, which described the wheels of the divine chariot as "full of eyes" (Ezek. 1:18).
- 11. Thorkild Jacobsen, "Toward the Image of Tammuz," in *Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays*, ed. W. L. Moran (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970), 100.
- 12. Block, Ezekiel 1–24, 296.
- 13. These men are not here further identified; however, Ezek. 9:6 makes it clear that they too are elders. On this, see Duguid, *Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel*, 70.
- 14. This obscure Hebrew phrase has inspired vast amounts of literature attempting to clarify it. In general it has been understood either as an insulting gesture or action of some kind, or as a final act of idolatry. See Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 299.
- 15. "He called in my hearing with a loud voice" (lit.) in Ezek. 9:1 closely parallels "[Though] they call in my hearing with a loud voice" (lit.) in 8:18.
- 16. So in 44:11 the Levites are assigned the duty of serving as guards ("having charge of" is the same word trans. "guards" in 9:1) at the gates of the new temple. See Rodney K. Duke, "Punishment or Restoration: Another Look at the Levites of Ezekiel 44:6–16," *JSOT* 40 (1988): 65.
- 17. The assonance of the Hebrew hanne' enāḥîm wehanne' enāqîm is lost in the NIV: "those who grieve and lament." Block translates "groan and moan" (Ezekiel 1–24, 307).
- 18. This total annihilation recalls the "holy war" associated with the occupation of the Promised Land (cf. Josh. 6:21).
- 19. Block, Ezekiel 1-24, 308.
- 20. Thus it is not coincidental that they appear at the north gate, the direction from which both divine and human enemies come in Ezekiel.
- 21. On the whole question of the veracity of Ezekiel's vision, see Duguid, Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel, 65–68.

- 22. Bruce Vawter and Leslie J. Hoppe, *Ezekiel* (ITC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 66. Compare in this regard Moshe Greenberg's conception of "private" cults (i.e., those administered without benefit of clergy) in "Prolegomenon," *Pseudo-Ezekiel and the Original Prophecy by C. C. Torrey and Critical Articles* (New York: Ktav, 1970), xxxiii, n. 47.
- 23. See my Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel.
- 24. Robert S. Candlish, Studies in Genesis (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1979 reprint), 327.
- 25. Tertullian, Against Marcion, 1.27.
- 26. H. Richard Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America (New York: Harper, 1959), 193.
- 27. Rob Owen, Gen X TV: The Brady Bunch to Melrose Place (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1997), 101.
- 28. See, for example, the account of such eclectic blends of religious elements among students given by Diane Winston in "Campuses Are a Bellwether for Society's Religious Revival," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (January 16, 1998), A60
- 29. One young lady, Sheila Larson, has explicitly dubbed her own brand of customized faith "Sheilaism." Others have followed the same course more implicitly. For a description of "Sheilaism," see Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 221, 235.
- 30. In the early church, baptism often involved the actual marking of the child with the sign of the cross on the forehead, which was seen as an exact parallel to the marking with a *tāw* that Ezekiel envisaged in Ezek. 9:4, since *tāw* in the ancient script took the shape of a cross (Origen, *Selecta in Ezechielem*, 13.800d; Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 3.22; Jerome, *Commentary on Ezekiel*, 9:4–6). The Reformers were unconvinced by this (correct) observation (see Calvin, *Ezekiel I*, 218), and their Puritan followers argued strenuously against the "noxious ceremony" of signing the cross, seeing it as a superstitious, man-made ritual. The *Directory of Public Worship* produced by the Westminster Assembly therefore requires baptism to be "by pouring or sprinkling of water on the face of the child, without adding any other ceremony." However, though the ceremony itself may be unwarranted, the intent of those who defended the ceremony was in line with the biblical concept of baptism, as the words of the *Book of Common Prayer* make clear: "We receive this child into the congregation of Christ's flock and do sign him with the sign of the cross, in token that hereafter he shall not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified, and manfully to fight under his banner, against sin, the world and the devil, and to continue Christ's faithful soldier and servant unto his life's end." The sign of the cross was not a magic amulet ensuring salvation, but a draft notice, enlisting the baptized into Christ's army. Having received "the king's shilling," as it were, one must now fight for Christ or face the consequences of being a draft-dodger.
- 31. Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 7. See esp. the quote from the Book of Common Prayer in the previous note.
- 32. "Evangelicalism: Recovering a Tradition of Spiritual Depth," The Reformed Journal (September 1990): 25.



- 1. On divine abandonment, see Daniel I. Block, *The Gods of the Nations* (Jackson, Miss.: Evangelical Theological Society, 1988), 125–61.
- 2. Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19*, 155.
- 3. This may explain why the problems of gender confusion with regard to these creatures in Ezekiel 1 are resolved in chapter 10 They are due to the tension between the grammatical gender of the living creatures (feminine) and the reality they represent, the cherubim (masculine). See Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 199.
- 4. Greenberg, Ezekiel 1–20, 191.
- 5. See my Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel, 114.
- See J. P. M. van der Ploeg, "Chefs du peuple d'Israel et leurs titres," RB 57 (1950): 42; Udo Rüterswörden, Die Beamten der israelitischen Königszeit: Eine Studie zu sr und vergleichbaren Begriffen (BWANT 117; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1985), 64.
- 7. Thomas Overholt, The Threat of Falsehood: A Study in the Theology of the Book of Jeremiah (SBT 16; London: SCM, 1970), 32.
- 8. So also Wevers, *Ezekiel*, 77. The RSV translates similarly, but as a statement rather than a question.
- 9. The spatial pairing "near" and "far off/away" is a standard one in Hebrew and is also found in Ezekiel 6:12 and 22:5, though without the same overtones of "inhabitant of the land/exile." In his commentary, Zimmerli notes that the nearest parallel to the unique Hebrew form used here occurs in the "far off" in Ps. 10:1, though he himself did not adopt a spatial understanding of "near" here (*Ezekiel*, 1:258).
- 10. Ezekiel, 54.
- 11. Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19*, 160; Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 187.
- 12. Wevers, Ezekiel, 77.
- 13. Eichrodt, Ezekiel, 167; Cooke, Ezekiel, 122.

- 14. Repointing the MT's imperative $(rah^2q\hat{u})$ as a perfect $(r\bar{a}h^2q\hat{u})$, along with most modern and some medieval interpreters. See Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 1:229.
- 15. Allen has noted the use of motifs from Ex. 6:6–8 in Ezek. 11:17–20 (as well as in 20:30–42) to depict the idea of a new exodus (*Ezekiel 1–19*, 165); however, the use actually starts earlier with the depiction of the anti-exodus from Jerusalem.
- 16. Lit., this phrase translates "the men of your redemption," i.e., those for whom Ezekiel has responsibility to act as their "redeemer," ensuring that their land remains associated with their name.
- 17. miqdāš me'at can either mean "a little sanctuary" (Greenberg, Ezekiel 1–20, 190) or "a sanctuary for a little time" (cf. NIV; RSV). Both translations are possible: for the former, cf. Dan. 11:34, while for the latter, see Hag. 2:6. Nevertheless, in a context where it is immediately followed by a promise of return, it seems best to understand it as a (positive) statement of the temporary nature of the Lord's presence among the exiles rather than a (negative) statement of the incompleteness of the Lord's presence with them (see Carl F. Keil, Ezekiel, trans. J. Martin, 2 vol. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988 reprint], 1:151). The waw consecutive + imperfect thus introduces a logical contrast between the two halves of Ezek. 8:16.
- 18. Allen, Ezekiel 1–19, 164.
- 19. Notice how "the thoughts (literally "ascendings") of your spirit" (NIV "what is going through your mind") issue in the murders of 11:6. They form a natural opposition to the Lord's thoughts, which come to the prophet through the descending of the Lord's Spirit, which literally "falls" on Ezekiel (v. 5).
- 20. Compare Jer. 5:1–2, where the prophet Jeremiah, in Jerusalem, is told to search the city for one righteous person. Should even one be found, the Lord will spare the city.
- 21. Hugh G. M. Williamson, Ezra-Nehemiah (WBC 16; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1985), li, 16.
- 22. Gordon McConville writes: "The books express deep dissatisfaction with the exiles' situation under Persian rule; the situation is perceived as leaving room for a future fulfilment of the most glorious prophecies of Israel's salvation and the cause of the delayed fulfilment is Israel's sin" ("Ezra-Nehemiah and the Fulfilment of Prophecy," VT 36 [1986]: 223).
- 23. The equivalent form with theophoric element would be Azariah, "the Lord helps" (1 Kings 4:2), or Azriel, "God helps" (1 Chron. 5:24). The occurrence of such names in variant forms with or without the theophoric element is common in the Old Testament: e.g., Nathan/Nathaniel, Dan/Daniel, Obed/Obadiah.
- 24. The name Jaazaniah ben Shaphan in Ezekiel 8:11 has an equally appropriate ring to it. Like the other Jaazaniah, the Lord indeed hears what he is saying (8:12), while like a šāpān (a hyrax or rock badger) he is buried away in a subterranean cave. Indeed, the hyrax was itself an unclean animal (Lev. 11:5), a fitting image for the idolatrous worshipers to conjure up.
- 25. There is some discussion as to the exact number of these marks. Calvin mentions the first two (*Institutes*, 4.1.9) as does the Augsburg Confession, art. 7 and art. 19 of the Church of England. The third is added in the Belgic Confession (art. 29) and the First Scots Confession (ch. 18), while the Westminster Confession reduces them to a single point, "the profession of the true religion" (25.2). Those who mention three marks have included the things they regard as necessary for the *well-being* of the church, while the Westminster Confession has focused simply on the one thing necessary for the *existence* of the church.
- 26. Ezekiel I, 280.



- 1. Greenberg, Ezekiel 1–20, 209.
- 2. For darkness/evening as symbolic of judgment see Jer. 13:16 (Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 210). The middle of the night is when judgment falls on Egypt (Ex. 12:29).
- 3. So Cooke, Ezekiel, 131.
- 4. Allen, Ezekiel 1-19, 179; Block, Ezekiel 1-24, 370.
- 5. The LXX translates: "So that he might not be seen." Similarly Cooke, *Ezekiel*, 132.
- 6. So the medieval Jewish commentators Rashi and Kimhi; similarly, Vawter & Hoppe, Ezekiel, 78.
- 7. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 219.
- 8. Indeed, "burden" ($m\bar{a}s's'\bar{a}'$) involves a further play on words, since it can refer either to a literal load to be carried, as in Ex. 23:5, or to a prophetic oracle, as in Isa. 14:28.
- 9. This ambiguity may account for the repeated use of the Hiphil of $y\bar{a}s\bar{a}$? ("to bring out") often where we would expect the simple Qal ("to go out"). The attraction to this formula may be linked to the idea of the journey into exile as an anti-exodus that we saw also in the previous chapter.
- 10. See esp. Ezek. 17:19–21, which uses similar language to 12:13–14 in depicting the consequences of Zedekiah's breach of covenant. Some commentators have suggested that Ezek. 17 may actually have been delivered earlier than Ezek. 12. See Thomas Krüger, *Geschichtskonzepte im Ezechielbuch* (BZAW 180; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989), 404–6.

- 11. Block, Ezekiel 1-24, 376.
- 12. On this general sense of 'am-hā'āres, see Talmon, "Judean 'am-hā'āres," 71.
- 13. How Good Do We Have to Be? (Boston and New York: Little, Brown & Co., 1996), 12.
- 14. Harvie Conn, *Evangelism: Doing Justice and Preaching Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 33. See also the examples he gives on pp. 49–56.
- 15. Galatians 305 B, D. See Geoffrey W. H. Lampe, "Diakonia in the Early Church," in Service in Christ: Essays Presented to Karl Barth on his 80th Birthday, ed. J. I. McCord and T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 50.



- 1. Johannnes Herrmann suggests that it has been introduced here specifically in order to provide a link with what follows (*Ezechielstudien*, [BWAT 2; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1908], 19). The connection is certainly not coincidental.
- 2. Cf. Ezek. 12:23–28; 13:21, 23; 14:11; 16:41–42, 63; 23:27; 34:10, 22, 28–29; 36:12, 14–15, 30; 37:22–23; 39:7, 28; 43:7; 45:8.
- 3. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 242.
- 4. Vawter and Hoppe, Ezekiel, 82.
- 5. See Ezek. 13:16; see also Jer. 6:14; 8:11.
- 6. Allen suggests that here "jackals" is the more appropriate translation since foxes hunt singly while jackals congregate in groups around ruins (*Ezekiel 1–19*, 201). However, foxes would presumably have found ruins equally conducive to their lifestyle, while the plural simply corresponds to the plural "prophets of Israel."
- 7. Henry L. Ellison, *Ezekiel: The Man and His Message* (London: Paternoster, 1956), 56. For a similar connection between foxes/jackals and ruins, see Lam. 5:18.
- 8. This metaphor has been vividly illuminated by the excavations of siege ramps and counter-ramps at Lachish. On these see Israel Eph'al, "The Assyrian Siege Ramp at Lachish," *Tel Aviv* 11 (1984): 60–70; David Ussishkin, "The Assyrian Attack on Lachish: The Archaeological Evidence From the Southwest Corner of the Site," *Tel Aviv* 17 (1990): 53–86.
- 9. The Hebrew word *ḥayiş* only occurs here in the Old Testament. In the Mishnah, this word denotes a rough stone wall not filled in with earth (*Śeb.* 3:8).
- 10. The word used here has been variously rendered and appears to be equivalent to "vanity" or "hogwash" (Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 407).
- 11. This expression of judgment normally occurs with $n\bar{a}t\hat{a}$ (Ezek. 6:14; 14:9, 13; 16:27; 25:7, 13, 16; 35:3) while here in 13:9 it occurs with $h\bar{a}y\hat{a}$: "My hand will be against [them]." This construction, which elsewhere indicates the force of divine inspiration, is here used as a pun: Those who never felt the reality of the divine hand in inspiration will now feel it in judgment (see Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 237).
- 12. Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 405.
- 13. Ezekiel too saw visions and recognized the potential effectiveness of divination. See Duguid, *Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel*, 94.
- 14. For the meaning of this *hapax legomenon*, compare the usage of the Akkadian cognate *kasû*, "to bind," often in a magical context (H. W. F. Saggs, "'External Souls' in the Old Testament," *JSS* 19 [1974]: 5).
- 15. On the analogy of 1 Sam. 9:7, where the seer gives his oracle in return for a small payment of bread, this interpretation of the significance of the barley and bread is to be preferred to that which sees these as the materials for the magical practices. See Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 1:297.
- 16. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 245.
- 17. For one example of this, see Michael G. Maudlin, "Seers in the Heartland: Hot on the Trail of the Kansas City Prophets," *Christianity Today* 35 (Jan. 14, 1991): 18–22.
- 18. In a survey of Baby Boomers, Wade Clark Roof discovered that 26 percent of them "believed" in astrology (*A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993], 72).
- 19. For an example of this, see Donald Bloesch's review of *The New Century Hymnal*, ed. A. G. Clyde in *Christianity Today* (July 15, 1996): 49–50.
- 20. "Women in the Church: A Biblical Survey," in Bruce, A Mind for What Matters (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 263.
- 21. See Robert W. Yarbrough, "The Hermeneutics of 1 Timothy 2:9–15," in A. J. Köstenberger, T. R. Schreiner, and H. S. Baldwin (eds.) Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9–15 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 178–85.

- 1. See Duguid, *Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel*, 110. On the strengthened position of the elders during and after the exile see Daniel L. Smith, *Religion of the Landless* (Bloomington, Ind.: Meyer-Stone, 1989), 94–99.
- 2. Duguid, Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel, 117.
- 3. The NIV's "I will . . . recapture [their] hearts" is probably too optimistic. *tāpas'* (lay hold of, seize) often has the sense of apprehend, arrest (e.g., Num. 5:13; Jer. 26:8). See Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 249.
- 4. The language of "any Israelite or alien living in Israel" is anachronistic addressed to those in exile. It is used here as an echo of the priestly style of law found in the Pentateuch. For the similarities to Lev. 17, see Greenberg, Ezekiel 1–20, 252.
- 5. Paul Joyce, *Divine Initiative and Human Response in Ezekiel* (JSOTS 51; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 67; Anthony Phillips, *Ancient Israel's Criminal Law* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970), 29–30.
- 6. Greenberg, Ezekiel 1-20, 250.
- 7. In fact, the two practices were frequently linked, with excommunication often acting as a preparation for the covenantal death penalty. See William Horbury, "Extirpation and Excommunication," VT 35 (1985): 34.
- 8. Blenkinsopp, Ezekiel, 72.
- 9. Ezekiel uses the Qal and Hiphil forms of šûb together in his appeal. We might capture the flavor best by translating, "Turn and return."
- 10. Greenberg describes the phrase "they will be my people, and I will be their God" as "the essential expression of the bond between Israel and its God," an expression drawn from the terminology of marriage and adoption (*Ezekiel 1–20*, 254).
- 11. David Powlison, "Idols of the Heart and 'Vanity Fair,' "Journal of Biblical Counseling 13 (1995): 49. See also Edward T. Welch, When People Are Big and God Is Small: Overcoming Peer Pressure, Codependency, and the Fear of Man (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997), 44–47.
- 12. "On Idolatry," The Ante-Nicene Fathers, ed. A. Roberts & J. Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 3.61.
- 13. Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1.11.8.
- 14. This principle is classically expounded by George Whitefield in "The Method of Grace," *Select Sermons of George Whitefield* (London: Banner of Truth, 1964), 81–82.



- 1. James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 2d ed. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1955), 151, 153. See John Day, "The Daniel of Ugarit and Ezekiel and the Hero of the Book of Daniel," *VT* 30 (1980): 174–84.
- 2. Harald-Martin Wahl, "Noah, Daniel und Hiob in Ezechiel XIV 12–20 (21–3): Traditionsgechichtliche Hintergrund," VT 42 (1992): 551–52; Block, Ezekiel 1–24, 448–49.
- 3. The use of mythical elements is a common feature of the genre of oracles against the nations. See John B. Geyer, "Mythology and Culture in the Oracles Against the Nations," VT 36 (1986): 129–45.
- 4. Baruch Margalit complicates the interpretative possibilities further by arguing that there is an allusion to the nonbiblical Danel in Ezek. 14 but not in Ezek. 28! See *The Ugaritic Poem of AQHT* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1989), 490.
- 5. This principle was not an inviolable rule, as Ezekiel's examples themselves show. Noah's children were preserved through the Flood because of their father's righteousness, but Job's children were not protected by his righteousness. However, the latter case is clearly regarded as the exception rather than the rule.
- **6**. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 261.
- 7. Block, Ezekiel 1–24, 450.
- 8. Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19*, 220.
- 9. See C. S. Lewis, The Problem of Pain (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 59.



- 1. Lawrence Boadt, "The Poetry of Prophetic Persuasion: Preserving the Prophet's Persona," CBQ 59 (1997): 19.
- 2. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 267. Note also the "how much less . . . " of 15:5, which is the same as "how much worse . . . " in 14:21.

- 3. Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19*, 214.
- 4. Diane Gabrielsen Scholl, "Alice Walker's Parable The Color Purple," Christianity and Literature 40 (1991): 259.
- 5. Greenberg, Ezekiel 1–20, 269.



- 1. The description of the genre of this passage as an "extended metaphor" or "narrative metaphor" comes from Julie Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel: The City As Yahweh's Wife* (SBLDS 130; Atlanta: Scholars, 1992), 11. Although the passage has allegorical features, it is not strictly an allegory, since there is not a point by point correspondence between the elements of the metaphor and the real world referents.
- 2. "Confront" (hôda; Ezek. 16:2) is legal terminology (Greenberg, Ezekiel 1–20, 272).
- 3. On the Hittites, see Gregory McMahon, "Hittites in the Old Testament," ABD, 3:231–33.
- 4. Galambush, Jerusalem, 81.
- 5. Meir Malul has pointed out the significance of Akkadian parallels in which a child is adopted ("caused to live") while "in its amniotic fluid and birth blood," meaning that the baby can never be reclaimed by its natural parents ("Adoption of Foundlings in the Bible and Mesopotamian Documents: A Study of Some Legal Metaphors in Ezekiel 16:1–7," *JSOT* 46 [1990]: 108–11).
- 6. NIV: "You . . . became the most beautiful of jewels. Your breasts were formed and your hair grew" should perhaps rather be translated, "You developed the ornament of ornaments, [namely] your breasts were formed and your [pubic] hair sprouted." The point is the physical development that accompanies the onset of puberty. See Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 276.
- 7. Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 1:340.
- 8. Again, the historical realities behind the metaphor peep through in the delay between the time of Jerusalem's birth and the time of the Lord's care for her. This delay is awkward in terms of the imagery of the foundling ("why was she not washed at once?"), but wholly comprehensible in terms of the underlying reality.
- 9. Galambush, Jerusalem, 95.
- 10. The beauty of Zion/Jerusalem is a central theme of Psalm 48.
- 11. Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 1:344.
- 12. See the discussion in Morton Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah and Israel in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries B.C.E.* (SBLMS 19; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1974), 44–49.
- 13. Compare the rationale of Mishnah Sotah 1:5: "She exposed herself for sin, God therefore exposes her."
- 14. Allen, Ezekiel 1–19, 242.
- 15. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 288.
- 16. Ibid., 305.
- 17. The word "establish" (Hiphil of $q\hat{u}m$) is usually used of confirming an already existing covenant rather than originating a new relationship (Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 291). It thus serves to underline the continuity between Israel's future relationship with the Lord and his original purpose.
- 18. For "to atone" (kipper) as paying a ransom, see Gordon Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 59.
- 19. Lit., "There will never again be opening of the mouth (i.e. self-justification) for you." See Greenberg, Ezekiel 1–20, 292.
- 20. Ezekiel, 141.
- 21. Cited in Thomas, Ezekiel, 108.
- 22. The tendency to downplay the "shocking" elements of this passage is no modern phenomenon; it is already present in the Targum, which mutes the sexual imagery (see Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel*, 77).
- 23. Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), 48. In a similar vein, the novelist Larry Woiwode is quoted as saying, "If sin isn't mentioned or depicted, there's no need for redemption. How can the majesty of God's mighty arm be defined in a saccharin romance? Real sin is the curse we wrestle with every day" (Chris Stamper and Gene Veith, "Get Real," World [July 4–11, 1998]: 18).
- 24. Ezekiel II, trans. T. Myers (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 181.

- 1. William McKane describes it as a statement "whose essence was opaqueness, mystification, enigma" (*Proverbs: A New Approach* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970], 267).
- 2. The Hebrew word *nešer* has a semantic range that includes both the griffon-vulture and the eagle. Here the abundance of feathers and the greatness attributed to the bird clearly indicates the latter.
- 3. Lit., "the land of Canaan." The equation "Canaanites" = "merchants" is due to the particular affinity of the Phoenicians for trade and is found also in Zeph. 1:11 and perhaps in the ambiguous Zech. 14:21.
- 4. Allen appropriately describes the rival eagle as "somewhat damned by faint praise" (Ezekiel 1–19, 257).
- 5. For a survey of the historical events referred to in this chapter, see the Introduction.
- 6. Greenberg, Ezekiel 1–20, 321.
- 7. Ibid., 322.
- 8. This "high and lofty mountain . . . of Israel" can only be Mount Zion. See Jon D. Levenson, *Theology of the Program of Restoration of Ezekiel 40–48* (HSM 10; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1976), 7.
- 9. A similar expectation is found in Isa. 11:1, where a shoot is anticipated, springing "from the stump of Jesse." See Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 1–12*, trans. R. A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 157. Note also the similarity of Isa. 10:33b and Ezek. 17:24.
- 10. Walter Brueggemann, Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1997), 42.
- 11. ANET, 205.
- 12. Morton Cogan, Imperialism and Religion, 48-49.



- 1. A true proverb applied to the wrong situation will lead to a false conclusion. "A stitch in time saves nine" is a valid proverb, yet if used where the appropriate proverb is rather, "Fools rush in where angels dare to tread," the results may be disastrous. Hence Prov. 26:9 warns: "Like a thornbush in a drunkard's hand is a proverb in the mouth of a fool."
- 2. Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 1:375
- 3. These kinds of "legal lists" for those who sought nearness to God are found elsewhere in the Old Testament (e.g., Ps. 15; Isa. 33:15) and elsewhere in the ancient Near East. On these lists, see Gordon H. Matties, *Ezekiel 18 and the Rhetoric of Moral Discourse* (SBLDS 126; Atlanta: Scholars, 1990), 88–105, and Moshe Weinfeld, "Instructions for Temple Visitors in the Bible and in Ancient Egypt," *Egyptological Studies* (ScrHier 28; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982), 224–28.
- 4. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 329. He also points out that the pairing of lifting up the eyes with mountains evokes an apostate version of Ps. 121:1: "I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from?" In place of the orthodox response, "My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth," the apostate seeks help from the idols whose high places are situated there.
- 5. This succession of three generations (righteous-unrighteous-righteous) is not a purely hypothetical construct but some scholars suggest a correspondence to the historical succession of Josiah-Jehoiakim-Jehoiachin. This perhaps accounts for the placement of Ezekiel 18 between chapters 17 and 19, which focus on the fate of the royal line; Ezekiel 18 would then further justify hope for the future of the exiled Jehoiachin. See Antti Laato, *Josiah and David Redivivus: The Historical Josiah and the Messianic Expectations of Exilic and Postexilic Times* (ConBOT 33; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1992), 358.
- 6. For *maddûa*' as a rhetorical device expressing affected surprise (18:19), see BDB 396c. The New Living Translation renders it: "'What?' you ask. 'Doesn't the child pay for the parent's sins?'"
- 7. Joyce, Divine Initiative, 48.
- 8. Greenberg, Ezekiel 1–20, 337.
- 9. Joyce, Divine Initiative, 52.
- 10. For this translation, see Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19*, 267.
- 11. The rhetorical device of calling on the hearers to do for themselves something that ultimately only the Lord can do, is also found in Deuteronomy, where Moses tells the people both that they must circumcise their hearts (Deut. 10:16) and that God will circumcise their hearts (30:6). The point is that God can be relied upon to act faithfully to his promises and to carry through in us the good work he has begun.
- 12. For the history of this discussion, see Matties, Ezekiel 18, 115–25.
- 13. See J. Gordon McConville, "Narrative and Theology in the Book of Kings," Biblica 70 (1989): 45.
- 14. On the concepts of "life" and "death," see Walther Zimmerli, "'Leben' und 'Tod' im Buche des Propheten Ezechiel," *ThZ* 13 (1957): 494–508.
- 15. New York: Schocken, 1981.
- 16. For a response, see Dan McCartney, Why Does It Have to Hurt?

- 17. "Sin is not a cul de sac, nor is guilt a final trap. Sin may be washed away by repentance and return, and beyond guilt is the dawn of forgiveness. The door is never locked, the threat of doom is not the last word" (Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* [New York: Harper & Row, 1969], 1:174).
- 18. "The Wailing of Risca," *The New Park Street and Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 7 (Pasadena, Tex.: Pilgrim, 1961, 1969 reprint), 11.



- 1. Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19*, 285–86. Alternatively, the prophetic use can be described as a "parody" of the lament genre, infusing an incongruous content into a familiar style (Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 594).
- 2. Ronald M. Hals calls it "incredibly crass" (Ezekiel [FOTL 19; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], 130).
- 3. Block demonstrates that there are several lexical links between the two passages (*Ezekiel 1–24*, 603, 608). Ezekiel will also allude to Gen. 49:9–10 in Ezek. 21:27.
- 4. On Ezekiel's distinctive usage of the phrase "the princes of Israel" (v. 1), see Duguid, *Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel*, 10–57.
- 5. Ezek. 19:2a should be translated as a question: "What is your mother? A lioness!" See Block, Ezekiel 1-24, 595.
- 6. Commentators disagree as to the method of hunting. Against the conventional translation of šaḥat as "pit," here and in v. 8, Moshe Held has argued that it rather denotes a kind of net, cognate with Akkadian šētu ("Pits and Pitfalls in Akkadian and Biblical Hebrew," JANESCU 5 [1973]: 173–90). Both methods of hunting lions are attested in antiquity.
- 7. Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 1:394.
- 8. The NIV here emends a difficult Hebrew text. Taking the MT as it stands, Greenberg explains the literal "he knew his widows" as "he came to know those whom his actions had made widows" (*Ezekiel 1–20*, 351).
- 9. The Delphic oracle was fond of such ambiguity, as when it told Croesus that if he went to war, he would certainly destroy a great kingdom. The statement was true but deceptive, for the great kingdom he destroyed was not that of his enemies, as he had supposed, but his own.
- 10. So, most recently, Allen (*Ezekiel 1–19*, 288). Allen argues on the stylistic grounds that the object of a prophetic lament is the future, not the past. The older argument based on identifying the mother lioness as Hamutal, the mother of Jehoahaz and Zedekiah, is less convincing.
- 11. Block has now suggested Jehoiakim for the second lion, reviving an older interpretation, with Jehoiachin and Zedekiah both represented in the oracle against the vine (*Ezekiel 1–24*, 605). This further underlines the complexity of the task of identification.
- 12. MT has (lit.) "in your blood" (see NIV note), which may be due to attraction to the similar phrase in Ezek. 16:6, 22. Two Hebrew manuscripts have the reading "your vineyard."
- 13. NIV "thick foliage" is possible, but Ezekiel uses the same word also in 31:3, 10, 14 to describe a majestic cedar, and there "clouds" seems clearly a better translation. See Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 353.
- 14. The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics (New York: Norton, 1991), 221.
- 15. For a classic example of this approach, see C. Peter Wagner, Frontiers in Mission Strategy (Chicago: Moody, 1971), 41–47.
- 16. Wagner states confidently, "This is not the norm" (ibid., 47).



- 1. The exact title given to this group varies. In Ezek. 8:11 they are called the "elders of the house of Israel," while 14:1 and 20:1, 3 speak of the "elders of Israel." Probably the same group is indicated by the "elders of Judah" in 8:1 (Duguid, Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel, 112).
- 2. Ibid., 113–18.
- 3. The niphal of dāraš (seek, inquire of) in the Lord's statement is often translated as a "tolerative Niphal" ("I will not allow them to inquire of me"). However, as Bruce Waltke and Michael O'Connor point out, "the tolerative Niphal often involves the element of efficacy: what the subject allows to happen can indeed be carried through" (An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax [Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990], 23.4g). Thus, the point is not so much that the Lord will put a stop to their seeking but their seeking will be ineffective; they will seek but not find.
- 4. Commentators have made many ingenious suggestions as to the substance of their query, based on inferences drawn from Ezekiel's response to them. But the whole point is that Ezekiel's response is not an answer to their inquiry! See

- Greenberg, Ezekiel 1-20, 387-88.
- 5. The phrase "the detestable practices of their fathers" is itself a striking inversion of the regular Deuteronomic phrase "the detestable ways of the nations" (Deut. 18:9). At the outset, Ezekiel's charge is clear: Israel's ancestors were no better than the pagan nations they replaced in Canaan (Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 620).
- 6. My analysis is broadly the same as that of Franz Sedlmeier, *Studien zu Komposition und Theologie von Ezechiel 20* (Stuttgarter Biblische Beiträge 21; Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1990), 212.
- 7. This is the only use in Ezekiel of the verb $b\bar{a}har$ ("he chose"). This verb is a favorite of Deuteronomic literature to express the relationship between the Lord and Israel; see Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 327.
- 8. *tûr* is earlier used of the Lord's preparing campsites in the desert ahead of his people (Deut. 1:33) and of the spies reconnoitering the land (Num. 13:1–2). These echoes underline the history of Israel's perverseness: Before the spies searched out the land and by a majority vote declared it unsuitable, God had already searched it out and declared it good.
- 9. The historical validity of this representation is frequently questioned (e.g., by Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 1:409). However, the rapidity with which the people slid into idolatry in the desert, constructing a golden calf barely three months after their departure from Egypt (Ex. 32), hardly suggests that their pre-exodus state was one of untarnished devotion to the Lord!
- 10. Walter J. Harrelson, *From Fertility Cult to Worship* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969), 30. Compare Matitiyahu Tsevat, "The Basic Meaning of the Biblical Sabbath," *ZAW* 84 (1972): 455.
- 11. The NIV's "So I said . . ." (Ezek. 20:8, 13, 21) is too weak. For 'āmar as "threaten" see BDB 56c, which cites also Deut. 9:25; see also NLT.
- 12. Note that these "not good" statutes and laws are not termed "my decrees and . . . laws" by the Lord (in contrast to the "good" statutes and laws that they rejected (Ezek. 20:11, 19, 24). See Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 20–48* (WBC 29; Dallas: Word, 1990), 12.
- 13. On this practice, see George C. Heider, The Cult of Molek: A Reassessment (JSOTS 43; Sheffield: JSOT, 1985).
- 14. So NIV; Greenberg, Ezekiel 1-20, 371.
- 15. Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 1:414.
- 16. Block, Ezekiel 1–24, 651.
- 17. See Rodney Clapp, "Why the Devil Takes Visa: A Christian Response to the Triumph of Consumerism," *Christianity Today* 40 (Oct. 7, 1996): 19–33.
- 18. "The Church of the 90's: Meeting the Needs of a Changing Culture," *Reformed Seminary Journal* (September 1990), 11. This trend is already visible. Wade Clark Roof cites the case of a man who described himself as "primarily Catholic," who as well as attending weekly Mass also belongs to an ecumenical prayer group and frequently worships at a local evangelical church because of its "good preaching" (*A Generation of Seekers*, 245).
- 19. See R. C. Sproul, Choosing My Religion (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).
- 20. Roof states: "Personal autonomy rather than family heritage or religious background will increasingly be the basis on which one relates to the sacred. What a person chooses rather than is born into will be decisive" (*A Generation of Seekers*, 259).
- 21. Ezekiel never uses the terminology of the "new Jerusalem" for the visionary city of the future, probably because of his negative portrayal of its past. For him, Jerusalem is the Great Prostitute (cf. Ezek. 16; 23). But it is clear what city he has in mind, in purified form, and the language of Revelation 21:2 suggests that such a designation is appropriate for our use.
- 22. "A New Way of Being the Church? Liberation Theology and the Mission of the Church in a Postmodern Context," *Evangel* 14 (Summer 1996): 50.
- 23. C. S. Lewis, The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 10.
- 24. A study of attitudes among members of Generation X (those born between 1963 and 1977) cites "lack of dogmatism" as one of five main characteristics that Xers are looking for in faith groups. See Andrés Tapia, "Reaching the First Post-Christian Generation," *Christianity Today* 38 (Sept. 12, 1994): 18–23.
- 25. This portrayal of God as an abuser and exploiter is not merely an ancient heresy; it is precisely the picture of God that David Halperin reads into this passage (*Seeking Ezekiel*, 170).
- 26. The Red Rose Collection, San Francisco, Calif.; October 1996.
- 27. See Religion and Medical Ethics, ed. Allen Verhey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 135–38.
- 28. As Frederica Mathewes-Green points out, the idolatry is not always on the part of the women who have the abortion; frequently, family or peer pressure are significant factors ("Why Women Choose Abortion," *Christianity Today* 39 (Jan. 9, 1995): 21–25.
- 29. Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, li.
- 30. See, for example, Gustavo Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, trans. C. I. & J. Eagleson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1973), 159.

- 1. The Hebrew versification is five verses different in this chapter from the English; the references in the commentary are to the English verse numbers.
- 2. MT has the indefinite *miqdāšîm* ("sanctuaries"); this is frequently repointed *miqdāšām* ("their sanctuary"), a reading actually found in a few manuscripts (Allen, *Ezekiel 20–48*, 19). Others identify the plural sanctuaries as the pagan shrines of Israel (see Wevers, *Ezekiel*, 1623).
- 3. Moshe Greenberg, Ezekiel 21–37 (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 420.
- 4. Lit., "with crushing of the loins"; the loins were considered the seat of internal strength in the ancient Near East.
- 5. Many commentators, along with the NIV, assume that it is "the news" that has come. However, in view of the obvious connection of the following phrase to Ezek. 7:14, it is better to see in the "it has come" $(b\bar{a}\hat{'}a)$ a reference back to the repeated prophecy of the judgment that would come $(b\bar{a}\hat{'}a)$; 7:5, 7, 10; cf. the masculine $b\bar{a}\hat{'}$ in 7:6, 12). See the translations adopted in the KJV, RSV, and NEB.
- 6. The Hebrew of this oracle is in places very obscure. Particularly difficult are v. 10b, which the NIV renders, "Shall we rejoice in the scepter of my son LJudahl? The sword despises every such stick," and v. 13, where the NIV has, "Testing will surely come. And what if the scepter Lof Judahl, which the sword despises, does not continue? declares the Sovereign LORD." These verses have so far defied the ability of commentators to make grammatical or logical sense of them; they may be marginal notes that have crept into the text (so Allen, *Ezekiel 20–48*, 19–20).
- 7. Clapping the hands can have a variety of meanings in the Old Testament, and the gesture has been variously interpreted. However, here, as in 6:11, it introduces a proclamation of judgment and is best interpreted as evincing anger (Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 679).
- 8. NIV: "and my wrath will subside" (v. 17) sounds as if the cooling of God's anger is not directly related to Israel's punishment; in fact, it is precisely through executing judgment on his people that his wrath will be satisfied.
- 9. *yād* here refers to an inscribed stone monument that simply served to mark the division of two routes (see Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 1:442).
- 10. As Allen suggests (Ezekiel 20–48, 27).
- 11. On the office of *mazkir*, see Henning G. Reventlow, "Das Amt des Mazkir: Zur Rechtsstruktur des öffentlichen Lebens in Israel," *ThZ* 15 (1959): 161–75.
- 12. Like mazkîr, tāpas' stems from the sphere of law and order. See Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 1:445.
- 13. There may also be a pun intended on Zedekiah's name, which means "The LORD is righteous."
- 14. This theme of the reversal of the status of a vassal as an exercise of royal power on the part of the Great King is also attested in Assyrian sources. See Donald J. Wiseman, *The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon* (London: The British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 1958), 44, lines 191–92.
- 15. This understanding is already present in the Targum and was widespread in the earlier part of this century; hence Cooke translates "to whom the right belongs" and adds, "a hint at the coming of one who will have the right to wear the crown, who will be the true king" (*Ezekiel*, 235). However, *mišpāṭ* nowhere else in Ezekiel has this sense of "right, claim."
- 16. See William Moran, "Gen 49:10 and Its Use in Ezekiel 21:32," *Bib* 39 (1958): 405–25.
- 17. Compare the similar reshaping of Gen. 49:9–10 in Ezek. 19, noted above.
- 18. Iain Duguid, "Messianic Themes in Zechariah 9–14," in *The Lord's Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts*, ed. P. E. Satterthwaite, R. S. Hess, and G. J. Wenham (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 278.
- 19. For more help in understanding biblical images, see L. Ryken, J. C. Wilhoit, and T. Longman III, eds. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998).
- 20. Jonathan Edwards on Heaven and Hell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 91. For a good recent defense of the traditional position, see Robert A. Peterson, Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995).
- 21. The Problem of Pain, 116.



- 1. Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 1:456.
- 2. Duguid, Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel, 38.
- 3. Reventlow, Wächter über Israel, 101-6.
- 4. MT has "with the blood." Ezek. 18:6, 11, 15 correspond to 22:9, but cf. 33:25.

- 5. To "forget" the Lord is distinctively covenantal language; see Willi Schottroff, "TDU," THAT, 902.
- 6. Reading *w^eniḥaltî*, "I will be defiled" for MT *w^eniḥalt*, "you will be defiled." The versions also have the first person singular, though they derive their translations from the root *nāḥal*, "to inherit." See Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 1:454, and compare 36:20 for the same idea.
- 7. Ezekiel 20–48, 37. The theme of God's scattering and dispersing his people among the nations is prominent in Ezekiel, being found also in 12:15; 20:23; 36:19.
- 8. Other examples of gathering as the redemptive reversal of scattering in Jeremiah and Ezekiel include Jer. 23:3; 29:14; 31:8, 10; 32:37; 49:5; Ezek. 20:41; 28:25; 29:13; 34:13; 36:24; 37:21; 38:8; 39:27.
- 9. The NIV, following the LXX and most commentators, reads $l\bar{o}$ humt $l\bar{o}$ not rained on") rather than $l\bar{o}$ m $l\bar{o}$ that it fits the parallelism better. See Allen, Ezekiel 20–48, 32. This emendation is possible but not required, especially if the "showering" is a negative rather than a positive image.
- 10. Allen, Ezekiel 20–48, 38; Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 1:467.
- 11. Rabbinic commentators discussed whether this verse implies that the great flood bypassed Israel (*b. Zebaḥ*. 113a). Such expectations of a future flood were apparently also present in Babylon; see Moshe Anbar, "Une nouvelle allusion à une tradition babylonienne dans Ezechiel (22:24)," *VT* 29 (1979): 352–53.
- 12. The *fact* of a relationship between these two passages has been generally recognized for over a century. The *direction* of the dependence has been debated, but to my mind the clinching argument in favor of the priority of Zephaniah is the use of *b*^e*qirbāh* in v. 27 rather than *betôkāh*, which is found frequently elsewhere in this chapter.
- 13. Greenberg, Ezekiel 21–37, 462.
- 14. For this sense of 'am-hā'āreṣ, see Talmon, "'am-hā'āreṣ," 68–78.
- 15. See Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (HSM 4; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1972), 3.
- 16. This idea was more fully developed in the rabbinic sources than in the Old Testament, but it is present in the idea of Jerusalem as the "center" or "navel" (Ezek. 38:12) of the earth, that is, the point from which the creation of the earth proceeded. See Jon D. Levenson, Sinai and Zion (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 115.
- 17. See Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 713.
- 18. The original Latin poem dates back to around the thirteenth century. This translation is by W. J. Irons, printed in *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. For its appropriateness in connection with this passage, see Millard Lind, *Ezekiel* (Believer's Church Bible Commentary; Scottdale, Pa.: Herald, 1996), 191.
- Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "Defining Deviancy Down," The American Scholar (Winter 1993). See also Gertrude Himmelfarb, The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1995), 234–37.
- 20. "Prince's Faith Receives Carey's Blessing," The [London] Times (Dec. 23, 1996).
- 21. For a contemporary writer not afraid to speak of sin and the wrath of God, see D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans 3:20–4:25; Atonement and Justification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 6–10.
- 22. This principle of law first and then gospel was laid out in the original Puritan manual of preaching, William Perkins' The Art of Prophesying (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1996, reprint of 1606 original). Its continuing influence is clear in C. H. Spurgeon's "A Plain Man's Sermon," where he asserts: "The law is the needle, and you cannot draw the silken thread of the gospel through a man's heart, unless you first send the needle of the law through the center thereof, to make way for it" (Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Sermons Preached and Revised in 1886, vol. 32 [London: Banner of Truth, 1969], 27). Similarly, R. B. Kuiper states: "The call to repentance must come first in evangelism" (God-Centered Evangelism [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1961], 134).



- 1. Paul Ricoeur, "The Metaphorical Process As Cognition, Imagination and Feeling," *On Metaphor*, ed. S. Sacks (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), 154, cited in Galambush, *Jerusalem*, 8.
- 2. Galambush, Jerusalem, 110.
- 3. Allen, Ezekiel 20-48, 48.
- 4. For a similar list of Israel's failings in the desert, see Ps. 106:7–39.
- 5. The details are recorded on the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III; see *ANET*, 280–81.
- 6. Galambush sees here a reference to Israel's subsequent rebellion against Assyria on the strength of Egyptian support (*Jerusalem*, 112). However, although this was certainly a further manifestation of the same mindset, seeking human deliverers instead of the Lord, this does not seem to be in the prophet's mind; it is Oholah's Egyptian *lifestyle* that she does not abandon (lit., "her adultery from Egypt"), not her Egyptian *lover*.

- 7. Alan R. Millard, "Sennacherib's Attack on Hezekiah," TynBul 36 (1985): 71.
- 8. Deut. 7:18; 15:15; 16:3, 12; 24:18, 22.
- 9. Simon J. DeVries, "Remembrance in Ezekiel: A Study of an Old Testament Theme," Int 16 (1962): 64.
- 10. Is it significant that the Hiphil of $\hat{u}r$ can have a sexual connotation, as in Song 2:7; 3:5; 8:4? See BDB, 735c.
- 11. Whether these last three are historical allies of Judah or Chaldean tribes is debated. The three names suggest a sinister wordplay, sounding like "punish," "cry for help," and "shriek" (Allen, *Ezekiel 20–48*, 50).
- 12. This is presumably metaphorical "overkill" since all three fates cannot simultaneously occur to individuals. Alternatively, three different (though equivalent) fates may be in view; compare the use of the same three modes of death in Ezek. 5:2.
- 13. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37*, 484.
- 14. Rhetorically, the charge is addressed to Oholah as well as Oholibah. However, as with the metaphor itself, the focus is clearly on Jerusalem (Oholibah) as the charge of "defil[ing] my sanctuary" (23:38) makes clear.
- 15. The reference to "women" here is not a moralizing application to women and adultery in general (so Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 1:492) but rather figurative, as in v. 10. However, it can scarcely be figurative of the nations (so Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 333; Allen, *Ezekiel* 20–48, 51) since they do not exist in the same covenant relationship to the Lord in Ezekiel. If a specific application is to be sought, they are surely figurative of future generations within the covenant people, who will learn from the fall of Samaria and Jerusalem the lesson that the generation prior to the Exile was unable or unwilling to learn from the fall of Samaria.
- 16. For the curious, in former days cricket pitches were left uncovered during rain delays. During the period after a rain delay, as the pitch (or "wicket") was drying out, the ball would frequently bounce or spin unexpectedly off a damp spot, causing great difficulties to the unfortunate batsman. In recent years, with pitches fully covered to ensure rapid resumption of play after a rain delay, "sticky wickets" are only a memory.
- 17. See Max Black, Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1962).
- 18. See Don Richardson, Peace Child (Glendale: Regal, 1974).
- 19. Ronald E. Clements, Ezekiel (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1996), 108.
- 20. Athalya Brenner, "Pornoprophetics Revisited: Some Additional Reflections" JSOT 70 (1996): 63–86. J. Cheryl Exum terms this chapter "the most pornographic example of divine violence" (Plotted, Shot and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women [JSOTS 215; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996], 109).
- 21. Galambush, Jerusalem, 23.
- 22. Ibid., 59.
- 23. For a thoughtful study of the issues, see Vern Poythress, "Just Penalties for Sexual Crimes," *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), 193–221.
- 24. Paradoxically, the parable of the good Samaritan has become equally hard to expound in a context where the adjective "good" is entirely comfortable, even expected, next to the noun "Samaritan."
- 25. John F. Bettler, "Counseling and the Doctrine of Sin," Journal of Biblical Counseling 13 (1994): 2.



- 1. On the date, see Block, Ezekiel 1–24, 772–73.
- 2. Wenham, Leviticus, 63.
- 3. 'el is ambiguous and can either mean the parable is to be addressed "to" the rebellious house or that it is "about" the rebellious house (Greenberg, Ezekiel 21–37, 497).
- 4. It occurs fourteen times in the book: 2:5-6; 3:9, 26-27; 12:2-3, 9, 25; 17:12; 44:6.
- 5. "To gather" is usually the language of restoration. Here, however, as in 22:19–22, the language has been diverted to speak of destruction.
- 6. MT has the word for "bones," but the bones are in the pot, not underneath it. It should be a similar word meaning "wood," as in verse 10.
- 7. The Hebrew for "put . . . on" ($\check{s}^e p \bar{o} t$, 24:3) sounds almost exactly like "judge" ($\check{s} \bar{a} p a t$).
- 8. This rather obscure word, which occurs only in this chapter, is normally translated "rust" (RSV) or "corrosion" (Allen), a condition affecting the pot itself. Thus the NIV renders it "the pot now encrusted." However, it may rather be referring to the contamination wrought by what is inside the vessel ("the pot whose filth is in her") rather than on the vessel itself (Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 778). This fits better with the depiction of the city of bloodshed in Ezekiel 22, which stresses repeatedly the defilement "in her."
- 9. The NIV, following MT, renders this "mixing in the spices." However, this translation does not fit the context, and the LXX and some manuscripts support the possibility that metathesis of Hebrew letters has occurred, so that the text should

read, "remove the broth." The removal of broth leaves the meat dry in the cauldron, ready to be burned. See Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 767.

- 10. Greenberg, Ezekiel 21-37, 509.
- 11. The cultic overtones of the intended meal are further underlined by the use of a copper caldron as opposed to the standard domestic cookware made of pottery (Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 776).
- 12. The English words "witness" and "martyr" can both be used to translate a single Greek word, and in the early church the concepts frequently became synonymous.



- 1. Daniel I. Block, Ezekiel 25–48 (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 5.
- 2. Stuart, Ezekiel, 249.
- 3. Block, Ezekiel 25-48, 17.
- 4. Allen, Ezekiel 20-48, 67.
- 5. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37*, 526.
- 6. An exception to this general rule is Jeremiah's prophecy against Babylon, which he entrusted to the staff officer Seraiah to read when he got to Babylon (Jer. 51:59–64). This is the exception that proves the rule, however.
- 7. Skinner, Ezekiel, 217.
- 8. Mark Galli, "Is Persecution Good for the Church?" Christianity Today 41 (May 19, 1997): 16–19.



- 1. The absence of a specific month is unusual since most of Ezekiel's dated oracles contain day, month, and year. The proposal of *BHS* that an original reference to the eleventh month has dropped out because the numeral was the same as that of the year is the most plausible (Cooke, *Ezekiel*, 294). Alternatively, Allen proposes that the unusual form of eleven is itself a corruption of the twelfth year (*Ezekiel* 20–48, 71). He leaves the month indeterminate.
- 2. Allen suggests that Tyre stood to benefit from Jerusalem's fall primarily in political rather than economic terms (*Ezekiel 20–48*, 75). That may be a correct observation in historical terms, but the oracles themselves focus entirely on Tyre as a leader in international commerce.
- 3. The description shows no interest in the peculiar difficulties of assaulting an island city, where the conventional means of siege walls and ramps and formations protected from above by shields (Ezek. 26:8) are rather problematic. Though Nebuchadnezzar's assault greatly reduced Tyre's significance and power, the city itself was not destroyed until the time of Alexander the Great (332 B.C.), who built a causeway out from the mainland to the island in order to be able to capture the city.
- 4. Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 2:71.
- 5. Thomas Boston, *The Crook in the Lot* (Wilmington, Del.: Sovereign Grace, 1972 reprint), 12. John Flavel similarly poses the question to the one experiencing affliction: "What if by the loss of outward comforts God preserves your soul from the ruining power of temptation?" (*The Works of John Flavel*, vol. 5 [London: Banner of Truth, 1968 reprint], 443).
- 6. Peterson, Reversed Thunder, 146.



- 1. Allen, Ezekiel 20-48, 93.
- 2. Block, Ezekiel 25-48, 95.
- 3. See ANET, 149-55; Day, "The Daniel of Ugarit and Ezekiel," 174-84.
- 4. Greenberg, Ezekiel 21–37, 574; Block, Ezekiel 25–48, 96.
- 5. Nine of the twelve stones from the high priest's breastplate are listed here, with the third set of three from the list in Ex. 28 omitted, perhaps accidentally during the course of the transmission of the text.
- 6. The Hebrew may also be read, "you were on the holy mount, you were a divine being" (Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37*, 584), emphasizing the essence of the sin of the king of Tyre. Like the original sin, it involved the claim to have "be[come] like

- God" (Gen. 3:5).
- 7. "Walking about" (hithallāk) occurs frequently in the context of the sanctuary. See Gordon Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story," in *I Studied Inscriptions From Before the Flood: Ancient Near Eastern Literary and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1–11*, ed. R. S. Hess and D. T. Tsumura (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 400–401. The reference to "stones of fire" is obscure but may refer to a hedge of sparkling gemstones around the garden.
- 8. Allen, Ezekiel 20-48, 99.
- 9. Block, Ezekiel 25-48, 4.
- 10. On the connection between these two passages, see Mark R. Strom, "An Old Testament Background to Acts 12:20–23," NTS 32 (1986): 289–92.
- 11. See Os Guinness, Dining With the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts With Modernity (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 71.
- 12. Our addiction to experts is prominent even where the results of our dependence are less than impressive. Anne Cassidy notes that this generation of children has been raised more by the advice of experts than any that preceded it. In spite of that fact, parents seem to be more bewildered and children more out of control than ever. Her radical solution is less, not more, dependence on "child development experts" ("Best Parenting Instructions Are Built in," *Chicago Tribune* [July 31, 1998], 1/25).
- 13. For the pitfalls of such politicization, see Charles W. Colson, "The Power Illusion," in Michael C. Horton (ed.) *Power Religion* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 25–38.



- 1. Block, *Ezekiel 25–48*, 128. In each case, the new section is introduced by the formula "The word of the LORD came to me..." and in every case except Ezek. 30:1 the oracle is dated.
- 2. The MT has *tannîm* ("jackals") but the rest of the water-based imagery requires reading *tannîm* ("sea monster"), along with many manuscripts and versions. The MT may be the result of a scribal error or an otherwise unknown variant form (Allen, *Ezekiel 20–48*, 102).
- 3. John Day, God's Conflict With the Dragon and the Sea (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), 94–95.
- 4. ANET, 374; cited in Lind, Ezekiel, 244.
- 5. The Egyptian loanword y^e ' $\bar{o}r$ can be translated either "Nile" or "streams." The NIV, like many modern translations, utilizes both English words in this chapter to translate this single Hebrew word.
- 6. RSV reads $l\bar{o}$ $tiqq\bar{a}b\bar{e}r$ ("you shall... not be ... buried") along with many Hebrew manuscripts and the Targum, for the MT $l\bar{o}$ $tiqq\bar{a}b\bar{e}s$ ("you will not be collected"). Whether or not this emendation is correct, it at least underscores the purpose of the gathering: This is not the gathering of return from exile but merely of bodies for burial, as in 2 Sam. 21:13–14.
- 7. Greenberg cites Sargon II of Assyria's statement that his contemporary counterpart in Egypt was "a king who cannot save" (*Ezekiel 21–37*, 604).
- 8. Donald Gowan is typical when he writes: the prophet "does not find it necessary to defend or explain away his earlier prophecy; in effect he just admits that it didn't happen" (*When Man Becomes God* [Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1975], 103. Similarly, Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37*, 617; Block, *Ezekiel 25–48*, 149.
- 9. Contra Apionem, 1.156; Antiquities, 10.228.
- 10. Cambridge Ancient History, 2d ed., 235.
- 11. Leslie Allen, having accepted that this oracle originates in the failure of the earlier prophecy, then goes on to note that "the redactional agenda of these verses is a different one" (*Ezekiel 20–48*, 111). It is the "redacted" (i.e., inscripturated) agenda with which we are concerned here.
- 12. Greenberg, Ezekiel 21–37, 616.
- 13. See NIV note. This nation is otherwise unknown from the ancient Near Eastern sources, unless it is a mistake for Lub, which is another term for (part of) Libya.
- 14. "The people of the covenant land" is frequently taken as an oblique reference to Judah (e.g., Allen, *Ezekiel 20–48*, 115; Block, *Ezekiel 25–48*, 159). However, the phrase "the land of the covenant," despite its biblical sounding overtones, nowhere else occurs to designate the Promised Land. The closest parallel is in Obad. 7, which speaks of "the men of your covenant," which the NIV appropriately renders "your allies."
- 15. See Edmund P. Clowney, "The New Israel," in Carl E. Armerding and W. Ward Gasque, ed., *Dreams, Visions and Oracles: The Layman's Guide to Biblical Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 207–20.
- 16. For this, see Iain Duguid, "Hagar the Egyptian: A Note on the Allure of Egypt in the Abraham Cycle," WTJ 56 (1994): 419–21.

- 1. It is interesting to note in passing that the "strong-armed man" was apparently a title appropriated by the Pharaoh of the day. See James K. Hoffmeier, "The Arm of God Versus the Arm of Pharaoh in the Exodus Narratives," *Bib* 67 (1986): 378–87.
- 2. Some have seen in the breaking of the two arms of Pharaoh, a reference to an attack launched by the Egyptian on two fronts, by land and by sea. One of these attacks had been defeated, and the other would likewise come to nothing (Kenneth S. Freedy and Donald B. Redford, "The Dates in Ezekiel in Relation to Biblical, Babylonian and Egyptian Sources," JAOS 90 [1970]: 471 n.39; Lawrence Boadt, Ezekiel's Oracles Against Egypt: A Literary and Philological Study of Ezekiel 29–32 [Biblica et Orientalia 37; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1980], 85). However, this seems unnecessarily subtle and takes no account of the rebreaking of the good arm. It is better to see these as two separate defeats for Egypt, one past and one future.
- 3. The NIV follows the MT and versions and reads "Assyria," a reading defended by Greenberg (*Ezekiel 21–37*, 637). In each of these word pictures of Ezekiel, however, the object of the oracle is first described in glorious terms and then brought low, which makes the oracle more appropriately directed at Egypt. The reference to Assyria presumably came in through a miswriting of *t*° aššûr, "cypress," or possibly of a misreading of a variant form (Allen, *Ezekiel 20–48*, 122). The difference in overall interpretation of the passage is slight: either Pharaoh is being compared to Assyria, the great tree that flourished and was cut down, or Pharaoh is directly compared to a mighty tree that flourished and was cut down.
- 4. Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 2:146.
- 5. Rather than NIV's "thick foliage" (see comments on Ezek. 19:11).
- 6. The NIV's "the earth below" is a misleading translation of 'ereş taḥtît; it is clearly part of the underworld, perhaps even the lowest part.
- 7. Sheol is often described as the home of all who die, hence the frequent English translation "the grave." This is not strictly accurate. Though in the Old Testament the godly may fear being abandoned by God to Sheol (Ps. 88:3), nowhere is a righteous man actually said to have gone down into Sheol. Perhaps the contrast between the fate of the righteous and the unrighteous after death is most clearly evident in Ps. 49, where those who trust in themselves are destined for Sheol (49:14), while the psalmist expects something different for himself. What that "something" is may not always be clear in the Old Testament, but in several places there is evidence of such a hope. On Sheol, see Philip S. Johnston, *The Underworld and the Dead in the Old Testament* (Ph.D. diss.; Cambridge Univ., 1993).
- 8. The root $d\bar{a}m\hat{a}$ ("to be like") does not normally occur in the Niphal; most translations assume a reflexive sense for it "you consider yourself like . . ." (Boadt, *Ezekiel's Oracles*, 129). $d\bar{a}m\hat{a}$ ("be cut off, destroyed") does occur in the Niphal, however, and there may well be a play on words here: "You consider yourself a lion of the nations" sounds exactly like "you are destroyed, O lion of the nations."
- 9. The description of Egypt as "uncircumcised" is a theological rather than literal assessment. Like the Edomites and Sidonians, it appears that the Egyptians practiced circumcision (Jack M. Sasson, "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," *JBL* 85 [1966]: 473–76). However, from Ezekiel's perspective, though they may have been physically circumcised, in God's eyes they remained "uncircumcised."
- 10. See Daniel I. Block, "Beyond the Grave: Ezekiel's Vision of Death and the Afterlife," BBR 2 (1992): 113-41.



- 1. Allen, Ezekiel 20-48, 153.
- 2. Here we should think of *pālit* as a "survivor" rather than a "fugitive." It probably referred to someone surviving the fall of Jerusalem (Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:192), rather than someone who had escaped deportation by the Babylonian forces (Stuart, *Ezekiel*, 315). Why should someone in the latter category make the arduous journey to Babylonia on his own, to the very place to which the Babylonians wished to deport him? As Clements puts it: "No right minded survivor would have sought refuge in the enemy homeland" (*Ezekiel*, 147).
- 3. Taylor, Ezekiel, 213.
- 4. Or perhaps "eating over blood," a proscribed form of divination (Greenberg, Ezekiel 21-37, 684).
- 5. Allen, Ezekiel 20-48, 153.
- 6. They are perhaps (stereo)typified by the three main characters in Douglas Coupland's book *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (New York: St. Martin's, 1991). These are described on the back of the book as having "been handed a society priced beyond their means. Twentysomethings, brought up with divorce, Watergate and Three Mile Island, and scarred by the 80's fallout of yuppies, recession, crack and Ronald Reagan, they represent the new lost generation—Generation X."

- 7. Jock McGregor: "Generation X: The 'Lost' Generation?" L'Abri Lectures 11 (Summer 1997). See also Stanley Grenz, A Primer on Postmodernism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 13.
- 8. Life After God (New York: Pocket Books, 1994), 178.
- 9. Human Nature in Its Fourfold State, 277.



- 1. Lorenz Dürr, Ursprung und Ausbau der israelitisch-jüdischen Heilandserwartung: Ein Beitrag zur Theologie des Alten Testamentes (Berlin: Schwetscke, 1925), 118–19.
- 2. Zimmerli, Ezekiel. 2:213.
- 3. Werner Lemke, "Life in the Present and Hope for the Future," Interp 38 (1984): 173 n.10.
- 4. See Joel 2:2, Zeph. 1:15 for the same phrase in the context of the Day of the Lord. See Allen, Ezekiel 20-48, 162.
- 5. Duguid, Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel, 122.
- 6. Bernd Willmes, *Die sogenannte Hirtenallegorie Ezekiel 34: Studien zum Bild des Hirten im AT* (Beiträge zur biblischen Exegese und Theologie 19; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1984), 511.
- 7. Block, Ezekiel 25-48, 292.
- 8. Jon D. Levenson, Theology, 86.
- 9. See Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 2:219; Ralph W. Klein, Ezekiel: The Prophet and His Message (Columbia, S.C.: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1988), 241.
- 10. Duguid, Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel, 47.
- 11. J. David Pleins, "From the Stump of Jesse: The Image of King David As a Social Force in the Writings of the Hebrew Prophets," *Proceedings of the Eastern Great Lakes and Midwest Bible Society* 6 (1986): 162.
- 12. Greenberg notes the significance of the absence of the blessing of victory in war; the new community is now directly under divine protection, as will become clearer in Ezekiel 38–39 (*Ezekiel 21–37*, 707).
- 13. The text of Ezek. 34:31 has aroused some suspicion since 'ādām ("people") is absent from the original text of the Septuagint. It is normally read as a clumsy secondary gloss, identifying the Lord's flock as being human, connecting this passage with 36:38 (Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 2:221). Alternatively, it has been argued that the words call attention to the depth and greatness of the divine condescension in meeting with a human being who is taken from the earth and returns to it again (Hengstenberg, Ezekiel, 305). But in the context that has just mentioned the fulfillment of the covenant with David and the Sinai covenant, might it not reasonably reach further back and affirm the restoration of the original covenant of creation, so that it is affirmed of the restored people, "You are 'Adam' and I am your God"?
- 14. Alastair V. Campbell, Rediscovering Pastoral Care (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981), 27.
- 15. Christopher J. H. Wright, An Eye for an Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1983), 59.
- 16. Poythress, The Shadow of Christ, 72.
- 17. Thus Leith Anderson writes: "The style switch [from traditional to 'shopping center' church] moves from 'farmer,' where one person does everything, to 'rancher,' where a leader works with and through others" (*A Church for the 21*st *Century: How to Bring Change to Your Church* [Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1992], 178). The distinction seems to have originated with Lyle Schaller, "Looking at the Small Church: A Frame of Reference," *The Christian Ministry* 8 (1977).
- 18. Thomas C. Oden, Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 49.
- 19. For a voice crying out against this trend, see the countercultural vision of Eugene Peterson in "The Business of Making Saints," *Leadership* 18 (Spring 1997): 20–28.
- 20. Church growth books generally identify the number at which a dramatic shift in church dynamics becomes necessary as somewhere between 120 and 200. See Kent R. Hunter, *Foundations for Church Growth* (New Haven, Mo.: Leader, 1983), 155.
- 21. For helpful comments on how the pastor of a large church can still exercise the ministry of a pastor, see Eugene Peterson, "The Business of Making Saints," 27.



- 1. Clements, Ezekiel, 158. The question of who will possess the land given to Abraham has already been raised in 33:24–29.
- 2. Lind, Ezekiel, 281.

- 3. Bernard Gosse, "Ézéchiel 35—36:1–15 et Ézéchiel 6: La désolation de la montagne de Séir et le renouveau des montagnes d'Israël," *RB* 96 (1989): 511–17.
- 4. This is the NJPS translation. The NIV has "since you did not hate bloodshed . . . "; however, the oath formula with "im-lō" normally introduces a positive statement. See Joüon-Muraoka, §165.
- 5. From Ezekiel's theological perspective, there were not in actuality two lands and two nations but one. Yet the de facto situation of two separate nations was what appeared to outsiders, such as the Edomites. But this de facto situation would not persist forever, as Ezek. 37:15–23 makes clear.
- 6. Block, Ezekiel 25-48, 322.
- 7. Stuart, Ezekiel, 331.
- 8. Allen, Ezekiel 20–48, 173.
- 9. In that respect, it is interesting to note that King Herod, who sought so desperately to kill Jesus as a baby, was himself an Idumean, or Edomite.
- 10. Block, Ezekiel 25-48, 336.
- 11. See the remarkable testimonies of those involved in the massacre recorded by Steve Saint in "Did They Have to Die?" *Christianity Today* 40 (Sept. 16, 1996): 20–27.



- 1. See Milgrom, Leviticus 1–16, 1004.
- 2. Block, Ezekiel 25-48, 348.
- 3. Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 2:247.
- 4. Lind, Ezekiel, 290.
- 5. Fairbairn, Ezekiel, 191.
- 6. Allen, Ezekiel 20-48, 178.
- 7. We need not see a contradiction between the "fortified" cities of Ezek. 36:35 and the "unwalled" cities of 38:11. The rhetorical contexts are entirely different. "Fortified" frequently functions as the opposite state for a city to that of "destroyed" (e.g., Isa. 25:2), while the idiom of a people living in "unwalled cities" denotes a people who live without fear of attack (Jer. 49:31). As Greenberg put it, Ezekiel was "not working to a systematic theology, but for immediate rhetorical effect" (*Ezekiel 21–37*, 732).
- 8. Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 2:251.
- 9. Ezekiel's further restriction of this group to descendants of Zadok will be discussed in reference to Ezek. 44.
- 10. For a fuller discussion of the diet laws, see Milgrom, Leviticus 1–16, 718–36.
- 11. On this, see R. W. L. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament: Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).
- 12. See John Piper, Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist (Portland, Ore.: Multnomah, 1986), 23–38.
- 13. John Murray comments: "No treatment of the atonement can be properly oriented that does not trace its source to the free and sovereign love of God.... God was pleased to set his invincible and everlasting love upon a countless multitude and it is the determinate purpose of this love that the atonement secures" (*Redemption Accomplished and Applied* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955], 9–10).
- 14. It can also be broken down differently, as in 1 Cor. 6:11, where the salvation experience is described as having three aspects: "You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." In Rom. 8:30, Paul mentions four aspects: "Those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."
- 15. Linda L. Belleville, "'Born of Water and Spirit': John 3:5," Trinity Journal 1 (1980): 125-40.
- 16. I appreciate the fact that many thoughtful Christians will disagree with me on this point; however, the above provides a strong rationale for why many in the evangelical camp baptize their children.
- 17. Block, Ezekiel 25-48, 360.
- 18. An example of this attitude within the Christian community would be Robert Schuller, whose "theology of self-esteem" defines salvation as "rescue from shame to glory" (*Self Esteem: The New Reformation* [Waco, Tex.: Word, 1982], 151). For Schuller, unlike Ezekiel, shame and salvation are mutually exclusive categories. A better perspective on shame and self-esteem is found in Welch, *When People Are Big and God Is Small*, 24–36.
- 19. Q.2 What must you know to live and die in the joy of this comfort?
 - A. Three things: first, how great my sin and misery are; second, how I am set free from my sin and misery; third, how I am to thank God for such deliverance (*The Heidelberg Catechism* [Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1989], 12).

- 1. $biq'\hat{a}$ ("valley") appears as the antonym of har in several places in the Old Testament, notably Deut. 8:7; 11:11; Ps. 104:8. For the "very high mountain" as a theological rather than geographical concept, see Levenson, Theology, 41. Intriguingly, perhaps underlining the contrast between the Babylonian $biq'\hat{a}$ and the Israelite har, the builders of the tower of Babel locate their false place of worship on the $biq'\hat{a}$ $b''eres'' sin'\bar{a}r$ ("a plain in [the land of] Shinar") in Gen. 11:2. In terms of the spiritual geography of the Old Testament, such a location is inappropriate for divine worship.
- 2. Renz, Rhetorical Function, 163.
- 3. Block, Ezekiel 25-48, 374.
- 4. The word *rûaḥ* occurs ten times in Ezek. 37:1–14, a fact obscured by the necessity of using three different English words to translate it (wind/spirit/breath), and reference to *rûaḥ* in verses 1 and 14 form an *inclusio*.
- 5. Duguid, Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel, 104.
- 6. From the Christian side, Zimmerli cites Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian, Cyril of Jerusalem, Epiphanius of Constantine, Ambrose, Severus, and John of Damascus (*Ezekiel*, 2:264). For the history of Jewish interpretation of the passage, see Greenberg, *Ezekiel* 21–37, 749–50.
- 7. For the scholarly consensus, see R. Martin-Achard, "Resurrection," ABD, 5:680-84.
- 8. This is merely one of a series of connections between Ezekiel and these two prophets. See Keith Carley, *Ezekiel Among the Prophets* (SBT 31; London: SCM, 1975), 13–47.
- 9. Miracles: A Preliminary Study (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 150.



- 1. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:273. Though the Hebrew words are different, the translators of the Septuagint rendered both by *rhabdos*, rod, scepter.
- 2. Allen, *Ezekiel 20–48*, 193. Greenberg sees the choice of 'es as being due to its ambiguity, representing both king and kingdom (*Ezekiel 21–37*, 753).
- 3. Lind, Ezekiel, 303. Interestingly, this is the same number of times as the key word rûah occurred in 37:1–14.
- 4. Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 2:274–75.
- 5. Compare Hos. 1:11, which speaks of Israel and Judah being reunited under one head $(r\bar{o}\vec{s})$.
- 6. The key word 'ôlām occurs five times in these verses.
- 7. See Carol Meyers, "David As Temple Builder," *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. P. D. Miller Jr., P. D. Hanson, and S. D. McBride (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 365–66.
- 8. See Harold Turner, From Temple to Meeting House: The Phenomenology and Theology of Places of Worship (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), 185.
- 9. To be fair, it should be admitted that in many "reformed" church buildings the pulpit was far more dominant than the communion table and the baptismal font, reflecting an unbalanced focus on the preaching of the Word to the exclusion of the other means of grace.
- 10. See "God's Plan for Reunion" in John Frame, Evangelical Reunion: Denominations and the Body of Christ (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 67–71.
- 11. It is likely that Paul has in mind the actual physical wall that divided Jew and Gentile in the Jerusalem temple in Eph. 2:14. Certainly the passage is filled with temple language, even apart from the explicit reference to the church as the new temple in Eph. 2:22. See Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 132–39.
- 12. Our Life in Christ (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 99.



- 1. Daniel I. Block, "Gog in Prophetic Tradition: A New Look at Ezekiel 38:17," VT 42 (1992): 157.
- 2. Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 2:301.
- 3. See Herodotus, Hist. 1.8–13.
- 4. Allen, Ezekiel 20-48, 204.

- 5. Block fittingly describes Gog as the "archetypal enemy" (Ezekiel 25–48, 436).
- 6. This phrase has been frequently translated as "prince of Rosh" (cf. NIV note), where Rosh is understood as a place-name, ever since the time of the Septuagint. This translation is grammatically possible, but in the absence of any biblical evidence for such a place-name, it is better to see it as a hierarchical title, as in the similar examples of Num. 3:32 and 1 Chron. 7:40. See Duguid, *Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel*, 20. In addition, if $r\bar{o}$'s is part of the title, then Gog rules over a seven-nation coalition, which underlines the symbolic completeness of the forces arrayed against Israel (cf. the kinds of weapons that are subsequently burned for seven years, while the burial of Gog's army takes seven months). If $r\bar{o}$'s is a place-name, however, that symbolism is lost. For the best defense of the view that $r\bar{o}$'s is a place-name, see James D. Price, "Rosh: An Ancient Land Known to Ezekiel," *GTJ* 6 (1985): 67–89.
- 7. Lind, Ezekiel, 315.
- 8. Allen, Ezekiel 1–19, 72.
- 9. Note that this expression too, which can also be translated (lit.) as the "heights of [Mount] Zaphon," is a theological rather than geographical description. It is a description of the mythological cosmic mountain, the home of the gods (Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 148). In Ps. 48:2 and Isa. 14:13 the terminology is taken over and applied to the heavenly residence of the Lord; here, however, it may refer to its original signification as the home of the (pagan) gods.
- 10. So Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:288; Allen, *Ezekiel* 20–48, 198. Both delete the interrogative $h\bar{e}$ as due to dittography, following the versions.
- 11. Block, "Gog in Prophetic Tradition," 170–72.
- 12. Lind, *Ezekiel*, 318.
- 13. NIV "they will forget their shame" emends the MT to $w^n n \bar{a} s \hat{u}$. The translation "they will bear their shame," attested by all the versions and the Qere, assumes that $w^n n \bar{a} s \hat{u}$ is a shortened form of $w^n n \bar{a} s \hat{u}$. The Qal of $n \bar{a} s \hat{a}$ is rare and occurs nowhere else in Ezekiel, whereas $n \bar{a} s \hat{a} k^n l m m \hat{a}$ is frequent in Ezekiel and occurs in a virtually identical context in Ezek. 16:54. See Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:295.
- 14. Ambrose, *De fide ad Gratianum* 2.16, 138. Taking an alternative view, Augustine already protested against such a specific identification of Gog and his allies with particular historical nations in *The City of God* 20.11.
- 15. Robert L. Wilken, *The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1992), 244–45.
- 16. Bernard McGinn, Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1979), 151.
- 17 Ezekiel 754
- 18. Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon, trans. S. P. Tregelles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949; reprint of 1857). The Crimean War was fought between 1853 and 1856 as France and Britain sought to prevent Russian expansionism southeast into Turkey.
- 19. Scofield Reference Bible (New York: Oxford Univ., 1909). The view that Rosh is Russia is maintained in *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford Univ., 1967), though Moscow and Tobolsk are no longer mentioned.
- 20. The Prophet Ezekiel, 2d ed. (Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1972; reprint of 1918), 259.
- 21. Hal Lindsey's book *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970) includes chapters entitled "Russia Is a Gog" and "The Yellow Peril." Substantially similar scenarios are depicted in Harry Ironside, *Ezekiel the Prophet* (Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1949), 266–67; David Egner, *The Bear Goes South* (Grand Rapids: Radio Bible Class, 1979); and Clarence E. Mason Jr., "Gog and Magog, Who and When?" *Prophecy and the Seventies* (Chicago: Moody, 1971), 221–32. It should, however, be pointed out that not all dispensationalists have accepted the identification of Rosh with Russia; see, for example, Ralph H. Alexander, "A Fresh Look at Ezekiel 38 and 39," *JETS* 17 (1974): 157–69; Charles L. Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel* (Chicago: Moody, 1969), 220.
- 22. Edwin M. Yamauchi, Foes From the Northern Frontier: Invading Hordes From the Russian Steppes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 20.
- 23. BDB, 912c recognizes both possible translations of $r\bar{o}$'s, as a title or a country, but says of the latter "not identified"; this change is already evident in the 1906 edition. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti libros*, 2d ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1958), 866a, list it as "unknown." Lindsey also cites C. F. Keil as a supporter of the view that Rosh is Russia (*Late Great Planet*, 65); however, though Keil does read $r\bar{o}$'s as a place-name, he describes the attempt to link it with Russia as "a doubtful conjecture" (*Ezekiel*, 2:160).
- 24. Edwin Yamauchi, "Meshech, Tubal, and Company: A Review Article," JETS 19 (1976): 243-45.
- 25. Yamauchi, Foes From the Northern Frontier, 51.
- 26. b. Yoma 10a.
- 27. Ephraim A. Speiser, Genesis (AB; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1962), 66.
- 28. Ellison, Ezekiel, 134.
- 29. Stephen L. Cook, Prophecy and Apocalypticism: The Postexilic Social Setting (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 88–96.
- 30. This phrase is perhaps significantly absent from Ezekiel 38–39. The more general "after many days" (38:8) and "in that day" (38:18; cf. 39:11) do not carry the same eschatological weight (Block, *Ezekiel 25–48*, 428).

- 31. These are not true "apocalypses," however, since many key features are missing. Particularly striking is the fact that in almost all of these Hollywood scenarios the desired goal of the intervention by the [human] savior figure is not the radical transformation of our existence but simply the preservation of the American way of life. Thus in the recent movies *Armageddon* and *Deep Impact*, the savior figures sacrifice themselves in destroying the asteroids that threaten the earth simply to enable life to carry on much as before, symbolized in the latter film by the reconstruction of the Capitol building in Washington, D.C.
- 32. "The issues raised by the *Terminator* movies are the issues explored by Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. How is humankind to avoid extinction. . .?" (Gaye Ortiz and Maggie Roux, "The *Terminator* Movies: Hi-Tech Holiness and the Human Condition," in *Explorations in Theology and Film*, ed. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz [Oxford: Blackwell, 1997], 142).
- 33. In addition to the initials of Connor's name, calling his mother "Sarah" evokes the Old Testament mother of the promised child, further inviting us to explore the religious dimensions of the film.
- 34. See Ulrich H. J. Körtner, The End of the World, trans. D. W. Stott (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995), 1.
- 35. Disappointment With God (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 181.
- 36. Ibid., 174.
- 37. Joni Eareckson Tada, "A Stone Cold Fact," *Moody Monthly* 98 (May/June 1998): 71. See also John Kramp, "Spiritual Search and Rescue: The Effort We Make Reflects Our Sense of Urgency," *Moody Monthly* 97 (May/June 1997): 18–19.



- 1. Note that the year of liberation is explicitly mentioned in 46:17, and the number twenty-five and its multiples occur frequently in the dimensions of the temple. See Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:346. Medieval Jewish commentators also linked the date with the Jubilee year but in a different way, arguing that the "thirtieth year" of Ezek. 1 was the thirtieth year since the last Jubilee. Since the thirtieth year was also the fifth year of the prophet's exile (1:2), then the twenty-fifth year of the prophet's exile must be the Jubilee year. See Abraham J. Rosenberg, *Ezekiel: A Translation of Text, Rashi and Commentary* (New York: Judaica, 1991), 2:342.
- 2. Levenson, Theology, 39.
- 3. Ibid., 40.
- 4. Ibid., 42.
- 5. Block, Ezekiel 25–48, 515.
- 6. Kalinda R. Stevenson, *The Vision of Transformation: The Territorial Rhetoric of Ezekiel 40–48* (SBLDS 154; Atlanta: Scholars, 1996), 19.
- 7. According to Yigael Yadin, these gates were roughly seventy feet deep by twenty feet wide. See Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:352–55.
- 8. Steven S. Tuell, The Law of the Temple in Ezekiel 40-48 (HSM 49; Atlanta: Scholars, 1992), 59.
- 9. So Stuart, Ezekiel, 372.
- 10. Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 2:355; Stuart, Ezekiel, 375.
- 11. Vision of Transformation, 44.
- 12. "Burnt offerings" ('\(\bar{o}\)lost) here and in Ezek. 40:42 appear to represent all the sacrificial offerings that would be made (Allen, \(Exekiel 20-48, 230\)).
- 13. MT has liškôt šārîm ("rooms for the singers"). The NIV follows most commentators in emending to liškôt setayim ("two rooms"), on the basis of the LXX.
- 14. This passage, along with others that refer to the Zadokites, has frequently been assigned by commentators to a separate "Zadokite stratum." However, the evidence does not support such "stratification." See Duguid, *Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel*, 87–90.
- 15. Stevenson points out the predominance of square shapes in the realm of the holy and their absence in the profane areas (*Vision of Transformation*, 42). Similarly, as you move toward the center of the tabernacle, the spaces become progressively more square until you reach the Most Holy Place, which is a perfect cube. See Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple Service in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), 152.
- 16. Zimmerli locates the altar off-center, in front of the temple building, as a mark of the temple building being the center of gravity of the whole (*Ezekiel*, 2:355). However, comparison with Haran's diagram of the tabernacle (*Temple Service*, 152) encourages locating it in the center of the inner court. In that structure, even though the altar is not the "center of gravity" (that privilege belongs to the ark of the covenant), it still sits at the center of the courtyard.
- 17. The total number of steps is, not coincidentally, twenty-five (Allen, Ezekiel 20–48, 235).
- 18. Stevenson, Vision of Transformation, 27.
- 19. Moshe Greenberg, "The Design and Themes of Ezekiel's Program of Restoration" Interp 38 (1984): 193.

- 20. Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 2:380.
- 21. Greenberg, "Design and Themes," 193.
- 22. See Milgrom, Leviticus 1–16, 637.
- 23. Ibid., 447-52.
- 24. The examples are from Thomas, *God Strengthens*, 267; Peter C. Craigie, *Ezekiel* (Daily Study Bible; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 278.
- 25. Feinberg, Ezekiel, 242; Ironside, Ezekiel, 284.
- 26. The absence of specified building materials is a particular problem for literal interpretation, since these are precisely described in other situations where God instructs his servants to construct such edifices as the tabernacle and Solomon's temple. Of course, it should also be noted that Ezekiel is not instructed to build anything; he merely has to observe and recount to his fellow exiles what he has seen. The building he sees is already in existence.
- 27. If indeed the site in Jerusalem is intended. See below on the division of the land in chapters 47–48 on the problems that are posed there for a "literal" interpretation.
- 28. Susan Niditch, "Ezekiel 40–48 in a Visionary Context," *CBQ* 48 (1986): 216.
- 29. Ibid., 221.
- 30. The image comes from Katheryn P. Darr, "The Wall Around Paradise," VT 37 (1987): 271–79, though her concern is rather with the (invisible) wall around the new Promised Land than the (very concrete) wall surrounding Ezekiel's temple.
- 31. Note that Haggai, writing after the Exile, refers to priestly clothing as having a noncontagious holiness (Hag. 2:12), whereas in Ezekiel's vision the priests' clothes *can* transmit holiness (Ezek. 44:19). A higher standard of precautions is therefore necessary in the design of Ezekiel's temple.
- 32. For a rich development of this theme, see Edmund P. Clowney, "The Final Temple," WTJ 35 (1972): 166–77.
- 33. Ibid., 177.
- 34. Robert W. Bly, *The Sibling Society* (San Francisco: Perseus, 1996).
- 35. Kimberly Costello, cited in Rob Owen, Gen X TV, 11.



- 1. A similar pattern has been observed in the construction of the tabernacle. See Frank H. Gorman Jr., *The Ideology of Ritual: Space, Time and Status in the Priestly Theology* (JSOTS 91; Sheffield: JSOT, 1990), 48.
- 2. This also means that it travels along the east-west spine of the temple, a line of special sanctity in Ezekiel's temple (Block, *Ezekiel 25–48*, 578).
- 3. Stevenson, *Vision of Transformation*, 50. It may be, however, that the identification of the entire temple rather than the ark as the Lord's footstool represents once again a raising of the standards of holiness compared with the older traditions.
- 4. NIV translates the Heb. phrase used here as "the lifeless idols of their kings." Various translations of this phrase have been defended in recent literature. The RSV takes it as a literal reference to the corpses of the kings (so also Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices and Beliefs About the Dead* [JSOTS 123; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992], 116). Jürgen H. Ebach argued for their identification as offerings for the dead ("PGR = (Toten-)Opfer," *UF* 3 (1971): 365–68. However, the majority opinion has continued to accept D. Neiman's older view that these were memorial stelae erected in honor of the earthly king ("PGR: A Canaanite Cult Object in the Old Testament," *JBL* 67 [1948]: 55–60). See now the discussion in Theodore J. Lewis, *Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit* (HSM 39; Atlanta: Scholars, 1989), 141.
- 5. NIV follows the MT in reading $b\bar{a}m\hat{o}t\bar{a}m$ ("their high places"). However, this introduces a separate location for their idolatry in a context that seems centered around the temple mount. It seems better to revocalize with a number of Hebrew manuscripts and read $b^e m\hat{o}t\bar{a}m$ ("at their death").
- On the relationship of the terms melek ("king") and nās î" ("prince") in Ezekiel, see Duguid, Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel.
- 7. Stevenson, Vision of Transformation, 18–19.
- 8. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 452. The overall tabernacle complex was not a square, as Ezekiel's temple was, but rather two adjoining squares, one comprising the inner court and the other the outer court.
- 9. J. Gordon McConville, "Priests and Levites in Ezekiel: A Crux in the Interpretation of Israel's History," *TynBul* 34 (1983): 28.
- 10. NIV translates "sin offering" following the older terminology. However, the purpose of the haṭṭā't is not the forgiveness of sins but rather the purification of a place. For the terminology and the purpose of the haṭṭā't, see Milgrom, Leviticus I—16, 253–61.
- 11. Ezekiel, 2:433.

- 12. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 191.
- 13. Baruch Levine, Leviticus (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 23.
- 14. Behind all of the Old Testament shadows lies a heavenly reality, a reality that in Christ has now come down from heaven to earth, ushering in the New Testament epoch. For a fuller outworking of this principle, see Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 55–65.
- 15. Peter Jones, Spirit Wars: Pagan Revival in Christian America (Mukilteo, Wash.: Wine Press, 1997), 26–29.
- 16. The God Who Is There (Chicago: InterVarsity, 1968).
- 17. Holy Sonnets, xiv.



- 1. Greenberg, "Design and Themes," 194.
- 2. Milgrom, Leviticus 1–16, 451.
- 3. Duguid, Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel, 133–39.
- 4. Stevenson, Vision of Transformation, 121.
- 5. Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, trans. J. S. Black and A. Menzies (New York: Meridian Library, 1957), 121–51.
- 6. Duguid, Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel, 127-29; Stevenson, Vision of Transformation, 76.
- 7. Jacob Milgrom, Studies in Levitical Terminology 1: The Encroacher and the Levite; The Term 'aboda (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1970), 8–10.
- 8. Compare the NJPS translation, which places the paragraph break after Ezek. 44:8. See Rodney K. Duke, "Punishment or Restoration: Another Look at the Levites of Ezekiel 44:6–16," *JSOT* 40 (1988): 65.
- 9. Cooke, *Ezekiel*, 481.
- 10. See my Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel, 79-80.
- 11. Ibid., 82.
- 12. Stevenson describes this as the genre of "territorial rhetoric" (Vision of Transformation, 11–13).
- 13. Block, Ezekiel 25-48, 640.
- 14. Milgrom, Leviticus 1–16, 978–85.
- 15. It is not so much letting the hair grow long (NIV) as letting it hang uncared for, as in 24:17, 23 (Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:460).
- 16. Midrashic sources claimed that alcohol abuse was a factor in the deaths of Nadab and Abihu. See Pesiq. Rab Kah. 26:9; Midr. Lev. Rab. 20:9.
- 17. Where these laws differ from the Pentateuchal provisions, Ezekiel seems to be universally more stringent (Skinner, *Ezekiel*, 438).
- 18. Moshe Weinfeld, "The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East," *JAOS* 90 (1970): 184–205.
- 19. On the sociological function of these stories, see Smith, Religion of the Landless, 162-64.
- 20. Anthony A. Hoekema, The Bible and the Future (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 263.
- 21. Joseph A. Conforti, Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity Movement: Calvinism, the Congregational Ministry and Reform in New England Between the Great Awakenings (Grand Rapids: Christian Univ. Press, 1981), 120. This view of Hopkins represents a conscious distancing from the view of Jonathan Edwards, cited below.
- 22. C. S. Lewis, The Problem of Pain, 145.
- 23. Darrell L. Bock, Luke (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 488.
- 24. Thus there is something fundamentally sub-Christian about the popular old gospel song by Ira Stamphill, "I've Got a Mansion Just Over the Hilltop." This song asserts "I'm satisfied with just a cottage below / A little silver and a little gold / But in that city where the ransomed will shine / I want a gold one that's silver lined." It is striking that in the entire description of the joys of heaven in this song, God is not even mentioned!
- 25. Cited in Conforti, Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity Movement, 121.
- 26. "Communion with God," Select Letters of John Newton (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1960 reprint), 34.

- 1. The unit of measure is unexpressed throughout this passage, except for the buffer zone around the sanctuary, which is explicitly 50 cubits. The KJV inserted "reeds," on the basis of Ezek. 42:16–20, which identified the temple as 500 reeds square, but which has text-critical problems of its own. The overall description of the temple dimensions in chs. 40–42 seems predicated on the basis of a temple complex 500 cubits square. This makes the entire central portion about 8 miles square (25,000 cubits by 25,000 cubits). If the dimensions are in reeds, the central square is closer to 50 miles by 50 miles, which would leave virtually no land on either side for the prince before you arrive at the Mediterranean on the west and the Jordan on the east.
- 2. According to the NIV, which follows the Septuagint. The MT gives 25,000 by 10,000, restricting this "sacred district" to that occupied by the priests. Whichever is original, the difference is not merely the result of a visual error but of an exegetical difference over whether this refers to the inner, priestly portion, or includes the parallel strip assigned to the Levites. In favor of the Septuagint, 45:3 seems to suggest that the priestly area comprises only one part of the "sacred district," and 48:20 suggests that the overall 25,000 square is made up of the sacred area and the 5,000 by 25,000 strip assigned to the city. In favor of the MT, see Stevenson, *Vision of Transformation*, 31–32.
- 3. E. G. King, "The Prince in Ezekiel," Old Testament Student 5 (1885): 115.
- 4. The arrangement of the levitical and priestly strips is not given explicitly, causing some to argue that the sequence moves from north to south (priestly portion, levitical portion, city portion; e.g., Cameron M. Mackay, "Why Study Ezekiel 40–48," *EvQ* 37 [1965]: 161; Greenberg, "Design and Themes," 202). If, however, the motion is from the inside outward, as in the tour of the temple, then the priestly portion would be in the center, flanked on the north by the levitical portion and on the south by the city portion. Given the importance of geometric center in the square design of Ezekiel's temple, it seems most probable that the temple is located at the geometric center of the sacred portion.
- 5. This may be the only equitable way of distributing the land among the twelve tribes, given the topography of the Promised Land, as Greenberg asserts ("Idealism and Practicality in Numbers 35:4–5 and Ezekiel 48," *JAOS* 88 [1968]: 59–66). However, it is theology, not practicality, that is driving the division.
- 6. Stevenson, Vision of Transformation, 107-8.
- 7. Menahem Haran, "The Law-Code of Ezekiel 40–48 and Its Relation to the Priestly School," HUCA 50 (1979): 57.
- 8. See the discussion of the centrality of these features in Ezekiel 43.
- 9. Block, Ezekiel 25-48, 667.
- 10. Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 2:486.
- 11. Here 'am hā'āres seems to denote the entire worshiping community. See my Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel, 120–21.
- 12. Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 2:490.
- 13. Dennis J. McCarthy, Treaty and Covenant (AnBib 21a; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1981), 57.
- 14. Of course, given the permanently closed east gate of the outer court and the absence of any gate on the west, this is the only axis on which a procession through the temple can take place. Elsewhere, however, processions tend to be to or around sacred objects rather than through them (Ps. 26:6; 42:4; 68:24; cf. Neh. 12:37–43), and it seems to me that there is more at stake in this verse than mere "traffic control."
- 15. Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, Solomonic State Officials: A Study of the Civil Government Officials of the Israelite Monarchy (Lund: Gleerup, 1971), 80–110.
- 16. From the outside to the center (40:5–41:4); from the center to the outside (41:5–42:20); from the outside to the center (43:1–5); and from the center to the outside (43:13–46:24).
- 17. b. Šabb. 13b.
- 18. So Rashi, Ezekiel, 2.406.
- 19. b. Menah 45a.
- 20. The Scofield Reference Bible, 908; Feinberg, Ezekiel, 234.
- 21. As is pointed out by fellow dispensationalist Jerry M. Hullinger ("The Problem of Animal Sacrifices in Ezekiel 40–48," *BibSac* 152 [1995]: 280). Hullinger's own proposal is that the sacrifices achieve genuine "atonement" in the sense of purgation, protecting the restored sancta from accumulations of impurity. While this treatment is more sensitive to the significance of the various different sacrifices in the levitical system, it is doubtful that it is an adequate solution to the problem since Hebrews presents Christ's once-for-all sacrifice as the ultimate and definitive purgation (Heb. 9:12–14). If Christ has effectively cleansed the heavenly tabernacle once and for all, it is hard to see how there can be earthly repetitions of that purgation that do not detract from it. It is striking that *The New Scofield Reference Bible* at least allows the possibility that the sacrifices may not be intended "to be taken literally, in view of the putting away of such offerings, but is rather to be regarded as a presentation of the worship of redeemed Israel, in her own land and in a millennial temple, using the terms with which the Jews were familiar in Ezekiel's day" (888). No explanation is advanced of what this "nonliteral" sacrificial worship might look like.
- 22. Stuart, Ezekiel, 400; Willem VanGemeren, Interpreting the Prophetic Word (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 336.
- 23. Thomas, God Strengthens, 287; Feinberg, Ezekiel, 257.
- 24. Greenberg, "Design and Themes," 208; Steven Tuell, "The Temple Vision of zekiel 40–48: A Program for Restoration," *Proceedings of the Eastern Great Lakes Biblical Society* 2 (1982): 96.

- 25. Daniel I. Block, "Bringing Back David," in *The Lord's Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts*, ed. P. E. Satterthwaite, R. S. Hess, and G. J. Wenham (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 181.
- 26. Samson H. Levey, *The Messiah: An Aramaic Interpretation: The Messianic Exegesis of the Targum* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1974), xix.
- 27. Duguid, Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel, 55-56.
- 28. John Taylor is at least interested in asking that question, even if his answer ("It illustrates the fact that in ancient Israel no less than today liturgical experimentation was demanded by new situations") fails to convince (*Ezekiel*, 275).
- 29. Similarly the new re-creation in Ezek. 37 results not in the formation of one new man but an entire army!
- 30. Thus Gen. 1 involves three basic elements: forming the spaces (days 1–3), filling the spaces with occupants (days 4–6), and ordering time itself (the framework of "days"). On the priestly concern with the ordering of time, see Philip P. Jenson, *Graded Holiness: A Key to the Priestly Conception of the World* (JSOTS 106; Sheffield: JSOT, 1992), 182–209.
- 31. The first three elements are from Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 451–54. The fourth expresses the essence of the sin offering (haṭṭāʾt).
- 32. Block, Ezekiel 25-48, 686.



- Raymond Dillard and Tremper Longman III, An Introduction to the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 327.
- 2. Gwilym H. Jones, 1 & 2 Kings (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 184.
- 3. See Day, God's Conflict With the Dragon and the Sea.
- 4. For this as a theme in Ezekiel, see the comments on Ezekiel 1.
- 5. Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism," 402.
- 6. The fact that the prophet is instructed to measure the river at four different points is probably not coincidental (Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:512).
- 7. Ibid., 2:514.
- 8. Clifford, Cosmic Mountain, 49-51.
- 9. Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 2:515.
- 10. D. Ralph Davis, "The Kingdom of God in Transition: Interpreting 2 Kings 2," *WTJ* 46 (1984): 390–91. In this covenant context, the use of salt by Elisha in "healing the waters" perhaps takes on a more transparent significance as a key ingredient in covenant renewal ceremonies.
- 11. Thus the distinction between "universal" versus "national" restoration, drawn by Darr, is not quite accurate ("Wall Around Paradise," 271–79). Certainly the restoration is not universal in scope, but it is more than simply ethnic-national: It encompasses all who are part of God's renewed people.
- 12. In his book *Slouching Toward Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline* (New York: Regan, 1996), Robert Bork describes the danger presented to society by the trend toward unbridled antinomianism in our era: "Our modern, virtually unqualified, enthusiasm for liberty forgets that liberty can only be 'the space between the walls,' the walls of morality and law based upon morality. It is sensible to argue about how far apart the walls should be set, but it is cultural suicide to demand all space and no walls" (p. 65).
- 13. See Timothy Keller, "Preaching Morality in an Amoral Age: How Can You Blow the Whistle When People Don't Believe There Are Rules?" *Leadership* 17 (1996): 110–15, and "Preaching Hell in a Tolerant Age: Brimstone for the Broadminded," *Leadership* 18 (1997): 42–48.



- 1. Allen, Ezekiel 20-48, 285.
- 2. Stevenson, Vision of Transformation, 151.
- 3. Numbers 34 names this location Kadesh Barnea. Ezekiel's choice of name recalls the rebellion that took place there during the desert wanderings, when the Lord provided water for his rebellious people from the rock (Num. 20:13). It is not coincidental that Ezekiel has just described the river of life flowing out of the temple to provide for Israel's needs.
- 4. The order in which the boundaries are listed is different in the two accounts: Ezekiel starts in the north and moves counterclockwise to the eastern, southern, and western boundaries, while Numbers starts in the south and moves counterclockwise from there. In addition, Numbers gives most detail to the southern boundary markers while Ezekiel is

most precise in the north. Steven Tuell argues that the difference between them is essentially one of perspective: The account in Numbers views the land from an Egyptian perspective, while Ezekiel's description is that of the Persian or Assyrian authorities (*Law of the Temple*, 155–56).

- 5. Block, Ezekiel 25–48, 716.
- 6. G. Ch. Macholz, "Noch Einmal: Planungen für den Wiederaufbau nach der Katastrophe von 587," VT 19 (1969): 350.
- 7. Diether Kellermann, "TDOT, 2:444.
- 8. Stevenson, Vision of Transformation, 39-40.
- 9. Levenson, Theology, 116-17.
- 10. Ibid., 118.
- 11. As Cameron M. Mackay pointed out more than seventy years ago ("Ezekiel's Division of Palestine Among the Tribes," *PTR* 22 [1924]: 29). Most of the maps in commentaries and Bible atlases locate the sacred area further south, because they identify the "city" of the sacred reservation with Jerusalem, in spite of the fact that it is nowhere given that name in Ezekiel's vision. The result is that their diagrams depict significantly larger strips for the northern tribes than the southern tribes, although they never discuss how this can be maintained exegetically. Note, for example, the contradiction between the (correct) observation by Block that the tribal strips were all the same width (*Ezekiel 25–48*, 723) with the map given on p. 711, which shows the strips of the northern tribes as much wider than those of the southern tribes, while the sacred reservation turns out to be on the site of Jerusalem. Incidentally, this relocation of the temple away from Jerusalem provides another knotty problem for the dispensational view that Ezekiel's vision will literally be fulfilled in a future millennial kingdom.
- 12. So, e.g., Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:535. This assumes that the description of the sacred portion proceeds from the center out. Others have argued that the description of the sacred portion continues the pattern of the north-south progress of the tribal land division, which would place the levitical portion south of the priestly portion. So, for instance, Macholz, "Planungen," 335.
- 13. In ch. 45, Ezekiel had already indicated that this land will provide the resources for the prince to maintain the cult.
- 14. Levenson notes that this represents a distinct shift from tribal arrangement when Israel camped in the desert. In that arrangement (see Num. 2), the north was the least favored direction (*Theology*, 121).
- 15. For a similar dual image to convey complementary truths, consider the two sacrificial goats in the Day of Atonement ritual. One goat is slaughtered and its blood applied to the Most Holy Place to purify it, while the other goat has the sins of the people placed on its head and is driven off outside the camp (Lev. 16). This provides a twofold picture of atonement. On the one hand, blood is shed and presented to God, for "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Heb. 9:22). On the other hand, a sin-laden goat is driven out of the camp into the realm of death, demonstrating the theme of Ps. 103:12: "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."
- 16. Jürgen H. Ebach, Kritik und Utopie: Untersuchungen zum Verhältnis vom Volk und Herrscher im Verfassungsentwurf des Ezechiel (Kap. 40–48) (Ph.D. diss.; Univ. of Hamburg, 1972), 2.
- 17. Macholz, "Planungen," 349.
- 18. Duguid, Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel, 140-42.
- 19. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Studies in the Sermon on the Mount (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959–1960), 1:69.
- 20. Wilken, The Land Called Holy, 48.

DANIEL

THE NIV APPLICATION COMMENTARY

From biblical text . . . to contemporary life

TREMPER LONGMAN III



DEDICATION

To Alice

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General Editor's Preface

"In spite of present appearances, God is in control." That, Tremper Longman tells us over and over, is the core message of Daniel. What an appropriate message for Daniel's original hearers/readers. In exile in Babylon, it must have appeared to them that the great powers of the world—the Babylonians, the Medes, the Persians—were in control. By writing of his experiences as a captive Israelite who gained power in Babylon through his ability to interpret King Nebuchadnezzar's dreams, Daniel tells his compatriots that God, not a human king, is ultimately in control.

What an appropriate message for today also. When we look at our society and find overwhelming evidences of what William Bennet calls cultural decay and the Christian Coalition describes as the loss of a moral center, it is tempting to question whether God really is in control. Perhaps we are sophisticated enough to know that human kingdoms are not in control. The failure of Maoist China, the breakup of the Soviet Union, the steep decline in the fortunes of the United States—all impress on us daily that nations and states rise and fall. Still, we tend to see behind such misfortune powers that are anything but godlike—impersonal forces of fate, theories of deterministic science, Satan the master of evil. Can God possibly be in control?

Daniel said—and would say today were he with us—yes. In spite of present appearances, God is in control. Since this is the universal message of this book, the one that bridges the sixth century B.C. and twenty-first century A.D. contexts, it is worth our while to see how Daniel goes about convincing suffering readers of this hope-giving truth. He uses a two-pronged approach. He tells us six gripping stories of God's providence, then gives us five mystical visions, which together blast our senses with impressions of God's great power. Why this combination of literal historical stories and mystical visions?

Recently I sat by Long Lake in Mercer, Wisconsin, observing a loon feeding in the bay. At least I assume the loon was feeding. The bird would bob and float on the top of the water for some seconds, then suddenly dive, stay under water for two or three minutes, and then resurface, sometimes hundreds of feet from the diving point. My observation of the loon was of a series of lake-top appearances. But to understand fully the whole meaning

of those lake-top appearances, I had to infer what the bird was doing on the long dives that filled the intervals.

The book of Daniel is doing something similar. The historical stories of how God took care of the prophet as he navigated the tricky waters of Babylonian court politics are necessary to show us that God really does take care of his own. God is in control. Not in some meaningless, abstract, pie-in-the-sky way, but in the here and now.

But stories like this have their limitations. God's providence does not always show itself in "success" stories. Sometimes, as the book of Job attests, God is in control in cases where his children suffer mightily. "Success" stories are necessary to give us hope, but alone they tend to reify transitory elements of the stories—Daniel succeeded because he was a vegetarian, so if we all become vegetarians, we will succeed too. Daniel succeeded because he prayed in an upper room in full view of all the people of Babylon, so if we all pray in that manner we will succeed too. Not really. These stories are not irrelevant. They teach us important lessons. But they are like the appearances of the loon on top of the lake. In order to be fully understood, we must know that a great deal is happening under the surface.

Enter the apocalyptic visions, which communicate to us that a great deal is happening "under water." God's greatness can be illustrated through everyday stories but cannot be captured by them. We need something further to show us that God encompasses the ordinary and the everyday but also goes beyond it. Daniel's visions can be understood up to a point, but cannot be completely understood in all details. They are specifically designed to communicate mystery. They leave us uncertain about specifics even though they clearly tell us that God is in control.

Daniel's message about God's control requires both the stories of the first six chapters and the visions of the last six. The stories give us comfort, the visions a sense of our finitude. Without the latter, the stories could lead us to believe in a false relationship between human works and God's grace—if we do certain things, God must provide. Without the stories, the visions could lead us to an impractical, disembodied mysticism. With both, this book offers a hopeful confidence that God is indeed in control.

Author's Preface and Acknowledgments

THE BOOK OF DANIEL attracted my attention very early in my Christian life. As a college student in the turbulent 1970s, I was captivated by the book's vision of a violent end to history. Calmer times led to a more sober assessment of the purpose of the book, but I have never lost the thrill of reading Daniel's dramatic word pictures of the intrusion of God into the world as warrior and judge. If anything, the impact of the book has grown on me as I now see more clearly that those "simple" stories of the first half have such startling relevance for us as we struggle to come to terms with a hostile culture.

I have many people to thank for help in the composition of this book. During the past dozen years I have taught a doctoral-level seminar on the book of Daniel. Class discussions helped me sharpen my thinking about the book. For this reason, I would like to express my thanks to the students who participated in these classes. In particular, I thank Erick Allen, Mark DiGiasomo, and Jovanni Tricerri for their invaluable help as my research assistants.

This book is not the first that I have published with Zondervan. Through the years, my respect for Zondervan has grown enormously. In regard to this project, I thank Jack Kuhatschek and Verlyn Verbrugge for their insights and professionalism. I have also received excellent and insightful feedback from Terry Muck, the general editor of the series, and from John Walton of Moody Bible Institute. This volume is much better because of their critical interaction. I must say, however, that since I did not always follow their advice, they cannot be blamed for any shortcomings.

This book is dedicated to my wife, Alice, on the occasion of our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary.

—Tremper Longman III
Westmont College

Abbreviations

AB Anchor Bible

ANET Ancient Near Eastern Texts, ed. J. Pritchard

AusBR Australian Biblical Review

AUSS Andrews University Seminary Studies

BA Biblical Archaeologist

BAR Biblical Archaeology Review

BASOR Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research

Bib Biblica

BSac Bibliotheca Sacra

BT The Bible Translator

CBQ Catholic Biblical Quarterly

CBQMS Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series

ConBOT Coniectanca biblica, Old Testament

CT Christianity Today

EBC Expositor's Bible Commentary

ETL Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses

EvQ Evangelical Quarterly

ExpTim Expository Times

GTJ Grace Theological Journal

HDR Harvard Dissertations in Religion

HUCA Hebrew Union College Annual

ICC International Critical Commentary

IEJ Israel Exploration Journal

Interp Interpretation

IOS Israel Oriental Society

JA Journal asiatique

JANES Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society

JAOS Journal of the American Oriental Society

JBL Journal of Biblical Literature

JETS Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society

JMRS Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies

JNES Journal of Near Eastern Studies

JQR Jewish Quarterly Review

JSJ Journal for the Study of Judaism

JSNT Journal for the Study of the New Testament

JSOT Journal for the Study of the Old Testament

JSOTSup Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series

JSPSS Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplement Series

JTS Journal of Theological Studies

NAB New American Bible

NAC New American Commentary

NICOT New International Commentary on the Old Testament

NIDOTTE New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis, ed. W. VanGemeren

NIV New International Version

NJB New Jerusalem Bible

NLT New Living Translation

NovT Novum Testamentum

NRSV New Revised Standard Version

NTS New Testament Studies

OTL Old Testament Library

REB Revised English Bible

SBLDS Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series

ST Studia theologica

TOTC Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries

TrinJ Trinity Journal

TynBul Tyndale Bulletin

TZ Theologische Zeitschrift

VT Vetus Testamentum

WBC Word Biblical Commentary

WO Die Welt des Orients

WTJ Westminster Theological Journal

ZAW Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

Introduction to Daniel

Daniel is a Book of paradoxes. The first six chapters are deceptively simple stories of faith under pressure. Daniel and his three friends have been forced to leave their homeland, Israel, and settle in the Babylonian king's palace. They are compelled to learn foreign ways in preparation to serve the government, which has made a hostile incursion against Israel and looms dangerously over that country of their birth. Each chapter brings new challenges, and each time they rise to meet the crisis. Neither Daniel nor his three friends waver in their faith or ponder their actions. They certainly seek divine help, but they are confident in their God, even if God might not preserve their lives through a trial (cf. 3:16–18). God, however, is up to the task, demonstrating his sovereignty, his power over evil human intentions, again and again. Clear and encouraging, these six stories have spoken forcefully to many believers, including the youngest of children. Many of us who grew up in the church remember the stories of Daniel as a staple of children's Sunday school programs and vacation Bible school lessons.

Not so with the second half of the book, however! The simple division between chapters 6 and 7 masks a radical shift in genre and complexity. While children resonate with the lessons of Daniel 1–6, seasoned Bible scholars scratch their heads over Daniel 7–12 with the move from simple stories to obscure apocalyptic visions (see description and discussion of apocalyptic at the beginning of the commentary on chapter 7). The first half of the book are stories about Daniel; the second half are visions of Daniel. Even though there is a dramatic contrast in genre between the two halves of the book, however, the overall message of the book is uniform: *In spite of present appearances, God is in control*.

The Sovereignty of God

THE BIBLE IS a book about God. Daniel is no exception; it too is a book about God. We emphasize this at the beginning because the focus of the camera, to use a film analogy, is often on the human characters: Daniel, the three friends, Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Darius, Cyrus. But we must not be misled; Daniel's main function is to reveal God to us, the readers.

The Bible, however, is not interested in presenting its readers with an abstract understanding of the nature of God. We have little in the Bible that resembles modern systematic theology; certainly there is no listing and description of his attributes. God reveals himself in relationship with his people. We can see this in the dominant metaphors of God in the Bible. He is king, warrior, shepherd, husband, father, and mother, assuming that his people are his subjects, his soldiers, his sheep, his wife, his children.² As we will see, the book of Daniel utilizes some of these metaphors of relationship in support of the overall theme of divine sovereignty, but here I wish to draw attention to the fact that his sovereignty is not described abstractly in this book, but in the midst of the historical process, in the nitty-gritty of life.

We can anticipate fuller treatments by simply mentioning the first few verses of chapter 1, where we see that it is really God, not Nebuchadnezzar, who is behind the Babylonian's assertion of power over Judah. It is God, not Nebuchadnezzar and his educational and dietary regime, who is behind the extraordinary skills of Daniel and his three friends. It is God who is behind Daniel's ability to penetrate the secret of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in chapter 2. Each chapter tells a different story, but each one is a story of divine sovereignty.

God is all-powerful, and this narration and demonstration of his power has one important purpose: the encouragement of a beleaguered people. Faithful Israelites must have suffered in exile as they remembered the good relationship that they as a people had with their God in the land of Palestine. They must have suffered as they were forced to work for the good of the nation that oppressed them. And they did suffer as they found themselves in situations where they were pressed to compromise or else face dire consequences. The message of Daniel that God is all-powerful and in control in spite of present conditions intended to present a powerful encouragement to these people.

But who were these people? Who were Daniel's original audience? And, for that matter, who was Daniel himself? These questions lead us into the midst of one of the thorniest questions of the book.

Daniel and Its Original Audience

THE BOOK OF Daniel sets Daniel in the sixth century B.C. There is no doubt or dispute about that. Major figures from this time period, known from other biblical and ancient Near Eastern sources, play an important role in the book: Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Cyrus, as well as Jehoiakim. Daniel 1:1 is dated to the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim (605 B.C.) and the latest references include one to the "first year of King Cyrus" (1:21; 539 B.C.) as well as that great king's third year (10:1; 537 B.C.).

Details of this period as they relate to the text will be given at the appropriate place. However, briefly, the sixth century was a crucial moment for God's people and an interesting epoch in the history of the ancient Near East. In terms of the latter, the beginning of the book of Daniel coincides with Babylon's rise on the dust of the Assyrian empire. Nebuchadnezzar's incursions into Palestine from his command center in Riblah, Syria, coincide with Babylon's bid to push Egyptian power out of the region. Under Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon grew stronger and stronger and reached the height of its power. After his death, that power slowly dissipated, though there were interesting moments under such rulers (not named in the book of Daniel) as Neriglissar and Nabonidus (for the latter's association with Belshazzar, see comments on Dan. 5). On the horizon lurked the developing power known as Persia, beginning in the middle of the sixth century to expand its imperial pretensions. Under Cyrus Persia finally took Babylon in 539 B.C.

With this crucial date we can turn to the story of Israel, more specifically the southern kingdom of Judah, in the sixth century. The year 539 B.C. was an important one for God's people because with the ascension of Persian power came a change of policy toward subjugated peoples. While the Babylonians exiled the leaders of captured peoples like the Judeans to utilize their skills and resources at the center of the empire, the Persians felt it better to return these people to their homeland. The exile from which the Israelites returned in 539 B.C. began in earnest in 587/586 B.C., though earlier incursions are documented in 597 and, as we argue in the commentary on Daniel 1:1–3, in 605 B.C.

Of course, the setting of material like what we have in Daniel 1–6 does no more than give us the earliest date for the composition of the book. Nowhere do these chapters claim that Daniel or anyone else wrote them.

There is no claim for a sixth-century date of the book. They are accounts about the sixth century, not necessarily compositions of the sixth century.

The same may be said of the last six chapters of the book, but here there is a wrinkle. As mentioned above, these chapters contain prophecies by Daniel. The prophecies are recounted in the first person, but note that there is a third person frame. For example, the second section begins: "In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel had a dream, and visions passed through his mind as he was lying on his bed. He wrote down the substance of his dream. Daniel said ..." (7:1–2a). The composition of the final form of Daniel 7–12 likewise, therefore, makes no claim on a sixth-century composition.

However, we cannot use these textual facts to escape an exegetical problem that has plagued the study of the book of Daniel for many years. Though the prophecies have a third person frame, they are delivered by Daniel in the first person and therefore make an implicit claim to originate in the sixth century. The prophecies themselves, in other words, require a sixth-century setting, and here is the problem.

The issue concerns the fact that the first six chapters, while presenting themselves as historical narrative, are surrounded by issues of historical accuracy, while the second six chapters, which are prophecy, are uncannily accurate and precise through the second century B.C., at least up to a definite point. To many, these facts appear to result from a second-century date of composition, where some of the historical persons and events of the Babylonian and Persian periods are a bit murky, while the more recent events of the Greek period are well known and clear. In other words, chapters that present the events of the third and second centuries B.C. as prophecy appear to have been written after the fact, and we can recognize the attempts at real prophecy by their failure to predict accurately (see the extended discussion in connection with the prophecy of ch. 11).

The conundrum is that faithful interpreters find themselves on two sides of the debate. On the one hand, there are those who believe it is necessary to stick to a sixth-century composition. Others feel that the text drives them to a second-century date, and if they believe that the Bible is the Word of God, they must then struggle with the theological issue of a book that, at least on the surface, attempts to deceive its audience into thinking it is

prophesying future events when in reality it is casting the past into a future tense.

One attempt to get around this conundrum is to point to the well-established use of pseudonymity in the ancient Near East.³ Indeed, such pseudonymity was well practiced and often involved no attempt at deception. The original audience knew what the author was doing.⁴ However, I would argue that this approach fails when applied to the book of Daniel. The only way that Daniel's intention as demonstrated in the text can be achieved is by duping the audience. In other words, in prophecy given after the fact (*vaticinium ex eventu*) the idea was to convince the audience that the prophet was a true prophet to whom God had revealed the future. After showing that by predicting events that had already passed, then there was an attempt at a real prophecy. This is more than a literary device, and one must question whether such a textual strategy would find a place in God's Word.

This should not, however, obscure the extent of the difficulties of promoting a sixth-century date. The historical problems in the first part are real, and the solutions to some we can only speculate about (see commentary). Moreover, there are problems that need to be addressed at the end of chapter 11, when the prophecy appears to fail. We will provide another explanation than a late date at that point in the commentary, but we will not glibly push the problem under the rug.

These are difficult issues that will divide faithful interpreters for years. We must resist the temptation to turn this issue into a simple litmus test. Some argue that anyone who holds to a sixth-century date is a hopeless "fundie" who refuses to look at the evidence. Others will brand those who opt for a second-century date as "liberals" or "compromisers." I know that there will be reviewers of my work and approach who will view me as softminded or softhearted on this issue, but I argue that it is an unhelpful simplification to categorize on the basis of someone's conclusions on this matter. At the very least, we need to look at the motives and arguments behind the conclusions as well as at the treatment of the text in the light of the commentator's conclusions on the date of the book.

In view of the evidence and in spite of the difficulties, I interpret the book from the conclusion that the prophecies come from the sixth century B.C. I find the problems amenable to hypothetical solutions and the

theological issues of a late date difficult to surmount. However, two brilliantly insightful commentators on the book would strongly disagree with me. J. Goldingay interprets the book as finally redacted in the second century B.C. (for a description of this century, see the commentary on Daniel 11), but at the same time he is motivated by a strong desire to follow the teaching of the text. He also clearly believes in the supernatural universe presented by the Bible and does not doubt that God can speak about the future. Furthermore, as we look below the surface of Sibley Towner's excellent contribution on Daniel,⁵ we note that he understands the book to be divine self-revelation, even though he categorically denies the possibility of the type of prophecy we find in the latter part of the book. To simply rule out these two theologically astute interpreters on the basis of their late date of the book would be a tragedy.⁶

In short, while the present commentary still finds a sixth-century date defensible, it refuses to discount all those who interpret from a second-century date. We agree with J. Baldwin, also an eminent interpreter of the book of Daniel,⁷ who in one of her last publications before her death stated: "The fact that the standpoint of the writer (sixth or second century B.C.) cannot be ascertained for certain does not greatly affect the interpretation."

Bridging Contexts

THE ISSUES SURROUNDING the relevance and application of the Old Testament to our lives and society at the turn of the third millennium A.D. is complex and debated. How does a text that was originally addressed to an audience in the sixth century B.C. retain its significance? Many Christians have difficulty relating to the Old Testament because of its distance from our lives. I would describe the book of Daniel's distance from us in three areas:

(1) Chronological. The book of Daniel was written over two and a half millennia ago. Times change. I recently watched a television show about America in the 1950s and was struck by how different life was in my youth than it is now, and there we are only speaking about forty years.

- (2) Cultural. Daniel was addressed to Israelites living in Babylonian exile. The world of Daniel was an ancient Near Eastern world. Our Western culture is completely different, and even current Middle Eastern cultures bear only the slightest resemblance to the world in which Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar lived.
- (3) Redemptive-historical. Perhaps here is where Daniel and the whole Old Testament are strange to Christians. In a word, Daniel lived in the world before the coming of Christ. We live looking back on his earthly ministry, death, and resurrection. Christians find the New Testament more immediately applicable for obvious reasons.

That there is continuity between the New Testament and the Old Testament is obvious to anyone who reads the Bible. The New Testament is saturated with Old Testament references. It builds on the foundation of the Old, and there are a number of passages that strongly assert its continuing validity. Perhaps most notable is Jesus' affirmation of the Law and Prophets (a first-century A.D. way of referring to what we know as the Old Testament):

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:17–20)

Jesus then goes on to talk about some specific ethical issues from the Old Testament, and the amazing thing is that, while he affirms the Old Testament teaching on murder, adultery, divorce, and so forth, he subtly transforms that teaching to something more internal and demanding. Adultery is not just sleeping with a woman; it is lusting after her. Murder is not just physically killing another person; it is anger toward another. Some would argue that Jesus draws a distinction not with the Old Testament teaching, but with human tradition that had grown up around the law, but I don't think a careful reading of the Sermon on the Mount in the light of the Old Testament can sustain that analysis. As we read the New Testament, there is neither strict continuity (as theonomists would insist) nor discontinuity (as some dispensationalists would have it), but rather both continuity and discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments.

Sorting out continuity and discontinuity cannot be reduced to a formula or simple principle. We have to ask questions about the transformation of culture and the movement of redemptive history. We will sort these issues out as we deal with specific passages in Daniel.¹⁰ However, here we may introduce a couple of major issues that will affect our approach throughout.

Christ, the Center of Biblical Revelation

THE BIBLE IS a book about God. It is God's self-revelation, and as we have seen, the book of Daniel masterfully demonstrates God's sovereignty over his people's past, present, and future. God's sovereignty infuses his people with confidence and hope in the midst of a difficult world. When Daniel's original audience read the book, they were given a new vista on their situation and their God.

Christians need to read the Old Testament from the perspective of the original audience, to be sure. But it would be a mistake to stop there. After all, we have received further revelation, and this further revelation casts its illuminating light back on the Old Testament. Saint Augustine captured what I mean with his well-known and catchy phrase: "The New Testament is in the Old concealed, and the Old Testament is in the New revealed."

The point is that continuing revelation has not imparted new meaning to the Old Testament but has illuminated the richer meaning of many texts that were not clear to the Old Testament people of God. Though debated, I believe this is what 1 Peter 1:10–12 indicates:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.

Perhaps most illustrative of the point I am making are two comments made by Jesus after his resurrection. His disciples were in a quandary about the events surrounding his death. They did not understand what was happening. How could their leader, in whom they had invested such hopes, end his life in such an ignominious way? Jesus chides two different groups of his followers in two different, but similar passages:

He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:25–27)

He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. (Luke 24:44–45)

Most Christians would affirm that a handful of passages in the Old Testament predict Christ's coming in a spectacular way. If asked, they would point to the promise of the virgin birth in Isaiah 7, a reference to the "Anointed One" or Messiah in Psalm 2, and a few other passages. If we

looked closely at these passages, we would see that they too have an Old Testament setting and are not messianic in a narrow sense. However, the point I want to emphasize is that Jesus' words invite a much broader understanding of how the Old Testament anticipates his coming. In Luke 24 Jesus speaks in global terms ("Moses and all the Prophets," "all the Scriptures," "the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms"). As we read the Old Testament, we can read it with the expectation that we will encounter Christ there."

This principle can be and often is abused. It is wrong to take a short passage of Scripture out of context and twist it until some vague connection with Christ is seen. It is dangerous to read the Old Testament in the light of the New before first reading the Old Testament in its original context. But it is equally incorrect for a Christian to neglect to read the Old in the fuller light of the New Testament. After all, the Bible, while composed of many different writings from many different time periods, is ultimately one organic revelation, whose author is God himself. We would naturally expect that later revelation will more fully disclose the truths of earlier Scripture. We will operate with this principle in the commentary that follows. Of course, the reader will have to judge whether we have persuasively shown how Christ is anticipated in a particular passage or whether we have fallen into the trap of pressing the case too strongly.

"Go Thou and Do Likewise": Do We Follow the Example of Daniel?

As WE STUDY the book of Daniel, we expect to hear God's story. The book is filled with human characters and actions, but God is the subtle background character. We have also just argued that the Old Testament, including Daniel, is not just a theocentric book, but also a Christocentric book. Christ is anticipated in the Old Testament and proclaimed in the New. By emphasizing what might be called the theological message of the book, we avoid a common fallacy—a purely moralistic approach to the Old Testament. Most sermons and teaching on the book err by falling into the trap of simply turning Old Testament characters into heroes and villains: "Be like Daniel!" or "Don't be like Belshazzar!" Such teaching removes the focus of the biblical book from the intended main point, God, and thus misses the power of the passage.¹²

There is a further pitfall for which we need to account. Daniel 1–6 is historical narrative; it tells us what happened to Daniel and his three friends in the Babylonian and Persian courts. Is it legitimate to assume that just because Daniel is a hero of the faith that his actions are presented as normative for all time? When the question is presented baldly in this manner, the answer is certainly no. Just because Daniel acted in a certain way does not mean that his actions are instructions to how we should behave today. Daniel's vegetarian diet in the first chapter certainly should not have us pushing meat away from our tables. We don't have to pray in an upstairs room or in a room with windows (6:10) to pray sincerely. We must be very careful not to fall into the trap of saying that Daniel's actions are necessarily normative for our actions.

However, neither are they totally irrelevant. The Bible is not only a theological book; it is also an ethical book. The Old Testament historical books are not just there to teach us what happened in the past or about the nature of God in the abstract, but also intend to shape our emotions and our actions. God could have given us a philosophical or theological treatise if his goal was to simply inform us about his nature, but instead he gave us his Word in the form of stories and poems that evoke the whole person—will and emotions as well as intellect. That the Old Testament narratives have a didactic intention suggested by the preface to Psalm 78:

O my people, hear my teaching;
listen to the words of my mouth.

I will open my mouth in parables,
I will utter hidden things, things from of old—what we have heard and known,
what our fathers have told us.

We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell the next generation
the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD,
his power, and the wonders he has done.
He decreed statutes for Jacob
and established the law in Israel,
which he commanded our forefathers
to teach their children,
so the next generation would know them,

even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children.

Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands.

They would not be like their forefathers— a stubborn and rebellious generation, whose hearts were not loyal to God, whose spirits were not faithful to him. (Ps. 78:1–8)

The "parables" that follow in Psalm 78, which have as their intention obedience, are stories from Israel's past, mostly behavior to avoid. History can have a didactic function, and Old Testament history's lessons continue in an important sense in the New Testament period as well. After reminding his readers of the crossing of the Red Sea and the desert wandering, Paul asserts: "Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did" (1 Cor. 10:6). Throughout the New Testament, different historical episodes of the Old Testament are recited to serve as paradigms of behavior in the post-Christ period (e.g., Heb. 11:4–40; James 5:10–11, 16–18).

However, warnings about simple appropriation of the Old Testament are crucial. The chronological, cultural, and redemptive-historical distance must be taken into account as we adjudicate the application of an ancient text to a modern situation. Readers of this commentary will have to judge for themselves whether I have persuasively charted the course through the potential pitfalls, but, as discussions in the specific chapters will underline, they can be sure that I am aware of the dangers both of neglecting this important aspect of the biblical text as well as blindly assuming that the ancient text provides normative role models and principles of living for us today.

Outline of Daniel

I. Daniel and the Three Friends in Nebuchadnezzar's Court (1:1-21)

- A. Jehoiakim Delivered Into Nebuchadnezzar's Hand (1:1–2)
- B. Training for Service (1:3–7)
- C. Avoiding Defilement (1:8–16)
- D. Success Given to Daniel and His Friends (1:17–20)
- E. The Extent of Daniel's Ministry (1:21)

II. The God of Wisdom Reveals Nebuchadnezzar's Dream to Daniel (2:1–49)

- A. The King and His Advisors (2:1–13)
- B. God's Revealing of the Mystery to Daniel (2:14–23)
- C. The Dream and Its Interpretation (2:24–45)
- D. The King's Response (2:46–49)

III. God Saves the Three Friends from the Fiery Furnace (3:1-30)

- A. Nebuchadnezzar's Image of Gold (3:1–7)
- B. The Accusation Against the Three Friends (3:8–12)
- C. The Confrontation With Nebuchadnezzar (3:13–18)
- D. The Miraculous Deliverance (3:19–27)
- E. Nebuchadnezzar Worships God (3:28–30)

IV. Nebuchadnezzar's Pride Takes a Fall (4:1–37)

- A. Nebuchadnezzar's Decree to Praise the Lord (4:1–3)
- B. The Dream Report and the Search for an Interpreter (4:4–18)
- C. The Dream Interpretation (4:19–27)
- D. The Fulfillment of the Dream (4:28–33)
- E. Healing and Concluding Doxology (4:34–37)

V. The Writing on the Wall (5:1–31)

- A. The Profanation of the Holy Vessels (5:1–4)
- B. The Enigmatic Writing on the Wall (5:5–12)
- C. Daniel's Interpretation of the Inscription (5:13–28)
- D. Reward and Punishment (5:29–31)

VI. Daniel in the Lions' Den (6:1–28)

- A. The Plot Against Daniel (6:1–9)
- B. The Trap and Reluctant Punishment (6:10–18)
- C. Daniel's Rescue and the Accusers' Demise (6:19–24)
- D. Darius's Decree (6:25–28)

VII. The Vision of the Four Beasts (7:1–28)

- A. Horror by the Sea (7:1-8)
- B. Heavenly Power (7:9–14)
- C. Divine Victory (7:15–28)

VIII. The Ram and the Goat (8:1–27)

- A. The Vision of a Ram and a Goat (8:1–14)
- B. The Interpretation of the Vision (8:15–27)

IX. Daniel's Prayer of Repentance (9:1–27)

- A. Preparation for Prayer (9:1–4a)
- B. Invocation and Confession (9:4b–10)
- C. God's Punishment (9:11–14)
- D. Appeal for Mercy (9:15–19)
- E. The Prophecy of the Seventy Weeks (9:20–27)

X. The Vision of a Heavenly Messenger (10:1–11:1)

- A. A Heavenly Vision (10:1–9)
- B. A Conversation With a Supernatural Being (10:10–11:1)

XI. The Scope and End of History (11:2-12:13)

- A. Persia and Greece (11:2–4)
- B. Struggles Between the Kings of the North and the Kings of the South (11:5–20)
- C. The Climactic King of the North (11:21–35)

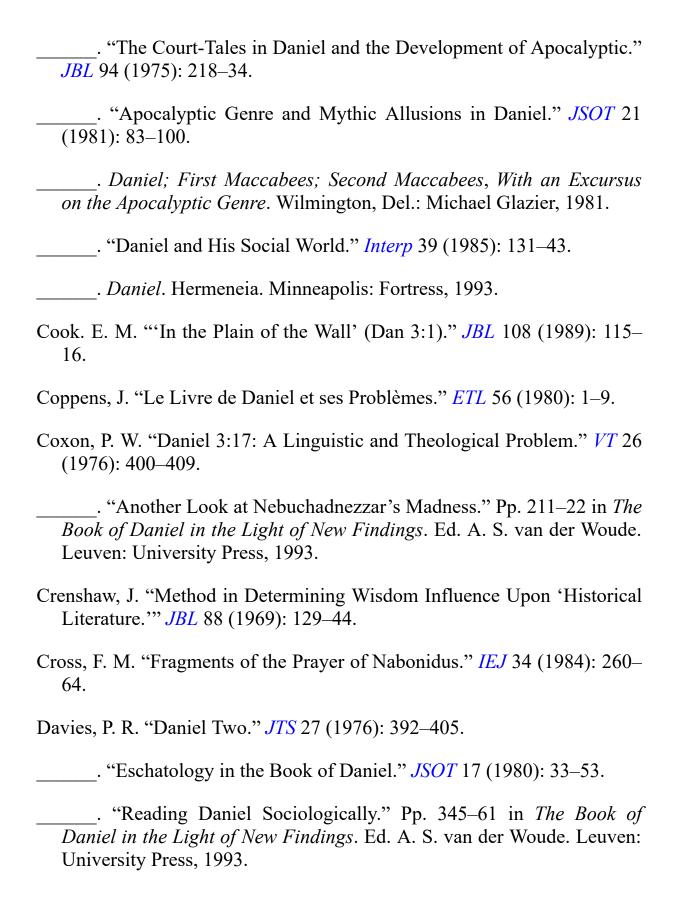
- D. The King Who Will Do As He Pleases (11:36–45)
- E. The Salvation of God's People (12:1-4)
- F. Final Words (12:5–13)

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Text and Commentary on Daniel

Daniel 1:1-21

¹In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ²And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god.

³Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring in some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility—⁴young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. ⁵The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.

⁶Among these were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. ⁷The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.

⁸But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. ⁹Now God had caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel, ¹⁰but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you."

¹¹Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, ¹²"Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." ¹⁴So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

¹⁵At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. ¹⁶So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.

¹⁷To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

¹⁸At the end of the time set by the king to bring them in, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. ²⁰In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.

²¹And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.

Original Meaning

THE FIRST CHAPTER of the book of Daniel is a distinct unit. It begins and ends with a chronological marker that identifies the beginning and end of Daniel's career ("the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim" [v. 1] and "the

first year of King Cyrus" [v. 21]). In terms of our dating system, this places Daniel's career from 605 to 539 B.C.¹

Daniel 1 provides an introduction for the whole book, plunging us quickly into the action and introducing the main characters of the book. It also illustrates the overarching theme of the book: In spite of present appearances, God is in control. In keeping with the court narratives in chapters 1–6, the first chapter narrates an episode from the experience of Daniel and his three friends that models another important lesson: Though in exile, God gives his people the ability to prosper as well as to be faithful. This chapter, and the book as a whole, must have served as a tremendous encouragement to the faith of those devout exiles who felt as if their whole world had come crashing down on their heads.

This first chapter has the following outline: (1) Jehoiakim delivered into Nebuchadnezzar's hand (1:1–2); (2) training for service (1:3–7); (3) avoiding defilement (1:8–16); (4) success given to Daniel and his friends (1:17–20); and (5) the extent of Daniel's ministry (1:21).

Jehoiakim Delivered into Nebuchadnezzar's Hand (1:1-2)

THE NARRATOR IMMERSES us immediately into the action. Nebuchadnezzar² has moved against Jerusalem. As Fewell has pointed out, our story begins at the end of another story.³ The forces that brought Nebuchadnezzar (or at least his army) to Jerusalem during the reign of Jehoiakim are hinted at elsewhere (cf. 2 Chron. 36:5–7⁴); here we are simply informed that he moved against Jerusalem, resulting in the deportation of the heroes of our book.

Before recounting the events that led up to Daniel 1:1, we must acknowledge the fact that many scholars (those who argue that Daniel 1 is written much later than the sixth century B.C.) believe that Daniel 1:1–2 is a confused historical memory,⁵ based on the author's misreading of 2 Chronicles 36:6–7 in connection with 2 Kings 24:1. On this basis, Hartman and DiLella deny that Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem in 605 B.C., the date implied by our text. In addition, they argue that Nebuchadnezzar did not even become king of Babylon until the next year.⁶ A surface reading of Jeremiah 25:1 ("the word came to Jeremiah concerning all the people of Judah in the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, which was the first year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon") seems to imply that

Nebuchadnezzar did not even become king until Jehoiakim's fourth year. These scholars also point out that the Babylonian Chronicle, our main native source of information for this time period, does not mention Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem.

There are at least two possible harmonizations that permit us to accept Daniel 1:1–2 as an accurate historical memory. First, Daniel 1:1 may well refer to Nebuchadnezzar as king in an anticipatory sense. After all, it is soon after Daniel's report of a siege of Jerusalem that Nabopolassar's death would bring Nebuchadnezzar to the throne. No one doubts, based on Babylonian records themselves, Nebuchadnezzar's presence as crown prince and field commander of the Babylonian army in their wars against Egypt in the area of Syria-Palestine in the years before 605 B.C.

We can also harmonize the data by reminding ourselves, at the instigation of the well-known Assyriologist D. J. Wiseman, that there were two systems of dating current in the ancient Near Eastern world, both of which can be found in the Old Testament.⁷ The above passages may be harmonized by assuming that Jeremiah utilized the Judaean method of chronological reckoning, which counts the first year of a king's reign as the first year, and that Daniel used the Babylonian system, which counts the first year as an "accession year." Hasel helpfully diagrammed the results:⁸

Chronology of Kings in Jeremiah and Daniel

Accession-year method	Accession year	2 nd year	Daniel 1:1
Non-accession-year method	1st year	3 rd year	Jeremiah 25:1, 9; 46:2

It is true that the Babylonian Chronicle provides ambiguous evidence in the argument for and against a Babylonian assault against Jerusalem in the period 605/604 B.C. Wiseman in 1965 argued that the Babylonian Chronicle fails to mention the siege of Jerusalem because it is preoccupied with "the major defeat of the Egyptians," but he goes on to say that "a successful incursion into Judah by the Babylonian army group which returned from the

Egyptian border could be included in the claim that at that time Nebuchadnezzar conquered 'all Hatti.'"

However, in 1985¹⁰ he agreed with Grayson¹¹ that the relevant line of the Chronicles (BM 21946, 8) should be read as referring to Hamath and not Hatti. J. J. Collins, then, took this as decisive evidence that the Daniel account is not accurate; there was no deportation of any size this early.¹² However, he fails to report, as Wiseman goes on to say, that the next section of the Chronicle does report activity in the area of Hatti. Wiseman further reminds us that the phrase used in Daniel 1:1 does not necessarily mean that a formal military siege was laid against Jerusalem; it could mean no more, he says, than to "show hostility." Thus, Wiseman demonstrates how the biblical reference to the third year of Jehoiakim "could be a justifiable dating if this covered the twelve months ending in 604 B.C.," which view he indeed holds.

In spite of the difficulties, therefore, we understand Daniel 1:1–2 as an accurate memory and will now place it within the broader historical landscape as we can reconstruct it from other biblical texts as well as ancient Near Eastern texts, particularly the Babylonian Chronicle.¹⁴

In 609 B.C. King Nabopolassar, Nebuchadnezzar's father, attacked Haran, and this signaled a period of time when Babylon's efforts were directed toward Syria-Palestine with an eye focused on Egypt, who was an ally of the remnants of the Assyrians. Battles with Egyptian and Syrian armies continued in the next few years.

In 605 Nebuchadnezzar was now the head of the army in Syria. He defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish, a victory that opened the rest of Syria and Palestine to the Babylonian forces. The Babylonian Chronicle at this point mentions in a general way that Nebuchadnezzar found success in his incursions into Syria-Palestine, and it is here that we understand that he besieged Jerusalem and compelled Jehoiakim to become an unwilling vassal. Debate surrounds 2 Chronicles 36:4–8 as to whether Jehoiakim himself was temporarily deported to Babylon or whether he was only threatened with deportation. In either case, we agree with Dillard that this deportation should be "associated with the deportation of Daniel and his friends along with articles from the temple in Jehoiakim's third year after Nebuchadnezzar defeated Neco at Carchemish" (cf. Jer. 46:2). 16

The book of Daniel, of course, does not argue for the historical event; it narrates it. Indeed, even more, it intends to interpret the event for us. Human observation would lead to a very different understanding than that provided to us by the narrator of this book. On one level, it seems clear: Nebuchadnezzar, the leader of a powerful army, cowed Jerusalem, and, in a token of his dominance, took away some of the temple vessels and, as we will find out in the next section, a few of the noble youth. To the human eye, it appeared that Nebuchadnezzar had power; Judah did not.

The narrator rips away the curtain and informs his readers of the reality behind the appearance. He does so simply by saying that "the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his [Nebuchadnezzar's] hand." Nebuchadnezzar's might, though considerable, was not the reason why Jerusalem fell under his influence; it was the result of the will and action of God himself. This subtle phrase introduces a major theme of the book, the conflict between overweening human power and the power of God. A major concern of the book is to reinforce the belief that the sovereignty of God far surpasses the power of even the most mighty of human rulers. This theme is supported here by the use of the word "Lord" ('adonai) rather than "LORD" (yhwh) to refer to God. The former emphasizes God's ownership, his control.

It is a sign that Nebuchadnezzar's victory over Jerusalem is only the occasion for the following story that the narrator does not here even hint at the reasons why God moved against his own people in this way. As we will see later, the prayer in Daniel 9 will show that Daniel himself agreed with other biblical authors (cf. the book of Kings) that the disaster took place because of the sin of the people. There he confesses on behalf of the people that they have rebelled against God and his commandments. But here again, Nebuchadnezzar's success is reported as the occasion that brought Daniel and his three friends to the Babylonian court.

Even before telling us about the human booty, however, the narrator mentions that Nebuchadnezzar took "some of the articles from the temple of God" and placed them in the temple of his god in Babylonia.¹⁷ The specific identity of these "articles" is left unspecified.¹⁸ In Exodus, the word "article" (*keli*) is a general term used to designate smaller objects used to support the cultic worship in the tabernacle (Ex. 27:19; 30:27; 31:8). In the book of Kings, we occasionally hear of the "articles," as when Asa

dedicated certain gold and silver articles to temple service (1 Kings 15:15), or, in an interesting parallel to our story, when Jehoash, king of Israel, attacked Amaziah, king of Judah, robbed the temple of the "articles," and carried them back to Samaria (2 Kings 14:14). 2 Chronicles 4:16 may give us an idea of the specific items included in the word *keli* when it lists "the pots, shovels, meat forks and all related articles." Of course, in Daniel 5 we also learn that these articles included "goblets," since Belshazzar seriously offends the Lord by using these for his banquet. Ezra 1:9–11 inventories the articles at the time of their return in consequence of Cyrus's decree, though some of these may have come from later sacks of the temple.¹⁹

In particular, our present passage anticipates the story in Daniel 5. Once again, from a human perspective, the plundering of the temple of the Lord, even if at this time only "some of the articles" were taken and placed in the Babylonian temple, could be seen as a great victory not only over Israel, but also over Yahweh himself. This act reflects a common ancient Near Eastern practice. A victorious army plundered the temple of the vanquished nation and placed the symbols of the defeated god in their own temple. An analogy is the placement of the ark in the temple of Dagon after the Philistines defeated the Israelites in battle during the youth of Samuel (1 Sam. 4–5). To the Philistines it appeared that Dagon had soundly whipped Yahweh, but subsequent events quickly changed their minds. The reality of the situation will take much longer to develop in Babylon, but the next time we see these "articles" in the hands of drunken Babylonians will be on the eve of their destruction (see comments in Dan. 5).

Training for Service (1:3–7)

BEGINNING WITH VERSE 3, the narrative focus begins to narrow. Nebuchadnezzar orders Ashpenaz,²⁰ one of his high officials, to begin the training process for the cream of the crop among the exiled youth.

We might well ask why Nebuchadnezzar would bother with the exiled youth. To answer this question we need to remember that at this time Nebuchadnezzar was trying to control Judah without actually taking it over. He has placed his puppet, Zedekiah, on the throne. His purpose with Daniel and the others was to train them in Babylonian ways for political and propaganda purposes. These members of the elite classes would become enamored with Babylonian ways and customs and either return to positions

of influence at home or stay in Babylon in important positions, perhaps even serving as quasi-hostages. We can see analogies at other times in ancient Near Eastern history.²¹

Jon Berquist reminds us that Nebuchadnezzar's policy was fueled by other pragmatic considerations as well. The expanding empire required an expanding bureaucracy, which could not be met by the expertise of the native population. So the elite of subdued nations were pressed into service in the interest of Babylonian empire building.²²

We refer to Daniel, his three friends, and the others implied²³ by the passage as members of the elite class of Judah for good reasons. In verse 3, for instance, they are referred to as "some ... from the royal family and the nobility." Rabbinic tradition associates this verse with Isaiah 39:7 and asserts that Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were descendants of King Hezekiah.²⁴ Even if not direct descendants of the king, they are nobly born in Judah.

But the qualifications for admission go well beyond right of birth. The king specified physical as well as intellectual qualities. That they were to be "young men" (*y*^eladim), though of imprecise age designation,²⁵ makes it hard to believe that they were over twenty and may have been much younger.²⁶

Furthermore, candidates for admission to the royal school were to have impeccable physical qualifications: "without any physical defect" as well as "handsome." The latter quality is easy to understand, though the standards of masculine beauty were possibly different. We may get a clue of what those standards are when we look at the artwork of ancient Mesopotamia²⁷ and note the well-muscled, full-bearded, luxuriantly curled hair of the warriors and kings. Or perhaps we are to picture Daniel and his friends more like the distinguished courtiers and advisors of the court.

It is the first trait ("without any physical defect") that has drawn the most discussion. The Hebrew word here (*mu'wm*) is known from sacrificial texts, describing the appropriate type of animal that can be offered to God (Lev. 21:17, 18, 21; 22:20, etc.). But it is not unknown elsewhere as the description of the physical perfection of a human being (e.g., Absalom [2 Sam. 14:25]; the beloved [Song 4:4]).

These men are not just good-looking and well-born, but they already show intellectual aptitude. They are "showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand." The verbs and nouns used in this description are familiar to those who have read Proverbs. Of course, in the mouth of Nebuchadnezzar the words do not carry the same ethical connotations as that book, but the narrator seems to be preparing us to recognize the four, especially Daniel, as a paradigm of the wise person.

In any case, the command of the king to his chief court official, Ashpenaz, was to train these young men in "the language and literature of the Babylonians." They were to be immersed in the culture of their enemies.

Aramaic was the native language of the Chaldean tribe that was in power in Babylon at the time, and this northwest Semitic language was becoming the lingua franca of the Near East. Nonetheless, the native language of the Babylonians was Akkadian, a Semitic language like Hebrew, but with an extremely complex writing system. It was written in syllabic cuneiform, with the additional complexity that it often utilized the ancient language of the region, Sumerian, in its technical literature. It is likely that our text has Akkadian specifically in mind in terms of the special training that Daniel and his friends were about to receive. Through archaeological discovery and philological advances, we know something of the literature of the Babylonians.²⁸ Today we have examples of historical writings, economic tablets, religious myths, heroic epics, love poetry, and more.

However, from later descriptions of Daniel's wisdom, we should highlight the importance that mantic oracles play in the Babylonia of Daniel's time. Daniel clearly would have been trained in the arts of divination through such means as interpreting unusual terrestrial and celestial phenomena, astrology, the examination of sheep livers, and so forth. Indeed, as the footnote to the NIV text points out, the Hebrew literally reads "the literature of the Chaldeans," not "the Babylonians." It is true that Chaldea, mentioned as the tribe in control of Babylonia, is another name for Babylon. However, it soon²⁹ became a byword for "magician" or "diviner," since the culture was so closely associated with this practice.

The art of divination, or reading omens, is well-attested in ancient Mesopotamia.³⁰ According to William Farber, omens were the primary way by which the gods revealed their "will, intentions, or fateful decisions to people."³¹ However, this type of divine revelation is different from what we know as biblical prophecy. Divination was a learned practice in that

portended events were associated with certain signs (like symptoms of an illness), whether the shape of a liver, unusual births, the flight pattern of birds, the stars, or dreams.³² Diviners used reference books to tease out the significance of the sign. Omens could be solicited or unsolicited. In the case of dreams, they could be solicited by an incubation rite, where the subject induced sleep expectant of a significant dream. But the reference books only helped diviners interpret dreams that the subject narrated to them. They did not have the tools to discover the contents of a dream if the subject chose, for whatever reason, to withhold that information.

The bottom line is that the text is telling us that Daniel was educated in the ways of Babylon, which surely included these mantic arts. As we will see, he not only took the class, he graduated summa cum laude (Dan. 1:17, 20)!

Indeed, as we read closely in this section, we marvel at just how far Daniel and his friends are taken in the Babylonian acculturation program. In verses 6–7, we learn that their names were changed. On the surface, this may seem benign to those of us who live in a modern Western culture, where name and identity are only mildly associated. In the ancient Near East, however, the name, which often contained the name of the one's deity, was integrally connected with a person's identity. Thus, the Babylonians began the process of reeducation by giving their captives new names.

Daniel ("God is my judge") becomes Belteshazzar (either "May [a god] protect his life" or "Lady [a goddess], protect the king").³³ Azariah ("Yah is my help") becomes Abednego (probably a bastardized form of "servant of Nabu"). Hananiah ("Yah has been gracious") and Mishael ("Who is what God is?") becomes Shadrach and Meshach. The latter two Babylonian names are of debated etymology, though many³⁴ see the former as a form of the name Marduk. Though we cannot be dogmatic on the details, it appears that in their attempt to give the Judean youths a new identity and allegiance, they bestowed names that associate them with Babylonian gods. The remarkable fact is that the Hebrew youths did not choose to fight this battle.

Conceivably, the transformation may have gone further. As J. Braverman has pointed out, early rabbinic and Christian commentary on these verses concluded that Daniel and his friends literally became eunuchs at this point.³⁵ After all, many of those who worked closely with the Babylonian king were eunuchs, and Ashpenaz's title has been understood to literally

mean "chief of the eunuchs." Jerome believed that Daniel and his friends here fulfilled Isaiah 39:7, "And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon."

In the final analysis, we cannot be certain. Some have argued that their description as "without defect" precludes their castration.³⁷ However, note that within the story the evaluation is made not by an Israelite priest but by a pagan king. To Nebuchadnezzar a eunuch in the service of the court is natural. Yet we must remember that native evidence indicates that not every male who served in the court was a eunuch. On this matter, we will have to suspend final judgment.

We have passed over the one matter in our passage that will dominate the rest of the chapter, the provision of food. During their three years of training, the king "assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table" (v. 5). Since this gift triggered a striking response from our four faithful Judeans, we will reserve discussion of the nature of this food until the next section.

Avoiding Defilement (1:8–16)

UP TO THIS point, Daniel and his three friends have provided no recorded resistance to their assimilation into Babylonian society and culture. They have received new names, submitted to a foreign educational curriculum, and perhaps even have had their gender erased. All of this makes their next move all the more startling. "Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine" (v. 8). What does Daniel hope to accomplish by his determined stand? Why has he chosen the area of his diet as the moral and theological line over which he refuses to step?

The question is not easy to answer with confidence. Of course, our first guess would be that Daniel is firm in his commitment to the dietary laws of the Old Testament, the laws of *kashrut* (Lev. 11; Deut. 12:23–26). After all, the verb "defile" (*ga'al*) denotes religious defilement. In other words, he wants to keep kosher. However, if Daniel's intention was to keep kosher, then why did he refrain from wine? The Old Testament laws do not restrict any but the Nazirite from wine (Num. 6:1–4). Further, in their threats and warnings, the preexilic prophets implied that it was impossible, by definition, to keep kosher in the land of captivity (Hos. 9:3; Amos 7:17).

If Daniel was not motivated by the dietary laws of the Old Testament, then perhaps he was concerned about the religious overtones of the food from the king's table. In a marvelously written chapter synthesizing material from various Akkadian texts, A. Leo Oppenheim informs us about the "care and feeding of the gods." We learn here that sumptuous food would be offered to the gods, and, after their having time to enjoy the repast, whatever was left would be brought to the king's table. No Mesopotamian king is ever recorded as going hungry.

Perhaps Daniel would have been troubled by eating food that was first offered to idols, so that we can here locate his determination to avoid the food. However, Daniel does not avoid all the food of the palace. He does eat the vegetables, and we have no reason to think that these were not offered to the gods along with the meat and drink.

Baldwin and Fewell⁴¹ separately argue that the motivation was more political than theological. Of course, in the ancient world these two spheres were not completely separate. In any case, these scholars point to the use of the Hebrew word *patbag* (translated "food" in v. 8; cf. also 11:26 as well as the idiom "to eat at the king's table" in 1 Sam. 20:30–34; 2 Sam. 9:9–13; 19:27–29) to argue that to eat food from the king's provision was an acceptance of his covenant/treaty overlordship. By refusing the food, Daniel refuses the relationship. But again, this view falters by virtue of the fact that Daniel did not make a public display of rejecting all the king's food. Indeed, he accepted the vegetables. On the human level, he and the three friends physically survived because the king sent food from which they selectively ate the vegetables.

Rather than these doubtful reasons, we believe that the motivation lies more closely connected to the story. Daniel and his three friends are in a process of education and preparation for service. Their minds as well as their bodies are being fed by the Babylonian court. If they prosper, then to whom should they attribute their development and success? The Babylonians. However, by refusing to eat the food of the king, they know it is not the king who is responsible for the fact that "they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food" (1:15). Their robust appearance, usually attained by a rich fare of meats and wine, is miraculously achieved through a diet of vegetables. Only God could have done it.⁴²

The diet of vegetables was a temporary regimen, as we learn from later texts that imply that Daniel at least enjoyed rich foods later in life.⁴³ Its purpose was to keep the four pious Judeans from believing that their physical appearance (and by consequence, perhaps, their intellectual gifts) were the gift of the Babylonian culture.

Another point, vitally important for later application, is often missed in the discussion. The diet was private, not public. As the four stood before Nebuchadnezzar and were pronounced the best in the class, the king could take pride in the products of his largesse. Only the Judean youths knew the truth.⁴⁴

After all, observe how they achieved their goal of a substitute diet. They made no public proclamation of their intentions. They staged no food strikes. Daniel quietly approached the chief official and asked him for permission not to partake. The chief official did not agree with them and refused to participate in their plan, but he did not reject them brusquely or violently. He could presumably have caused some trouble for the four, but the text informs us that "God had caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel" (v. 9). Behind this English translation we see the same verb that we encountered in v. 2, "God gave." While the Babylonians thought they were in control of the world and local scene, the Hebrew narrative makes it clear again that the true God is the One who orchestrates events for the good of his people.

True, the chief official declines the ruse. Daniel does not panic; he does not grow angry. He simply chooses another strategy to accomplish his goal. We see here the beginnings of a theme that will develop throughout the narratives concerning Daniel. He is the incarnation of a wise man—a man who knows how to navigate life. He knows the right action for the right situation; he knows the right word to effect a godly result.

In this case, Daniel turns to the guard whom the chief official put in charge of their diet (v. 11). He proposes this time a brief ten-day test: "Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink [and not the rich fare of the king]. Then [after ten days] compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food" (vv. 12–13). Perhaps motivated in part by the fact that he could partake of the rich fare while providing the vegetables for the four Judeans, the guard agrees; the test works; and the four eat vegetables to the glory of God for three years.

Success Given to Daniel and His Friends (1:17–20)

FOR THE THIRD time in the chapter, we read that God gave something to someone. In 1:2, he gave Jehoiakim and Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar. In 1:9, God gave the chief official sympathy toward Daniel and his friends. Now (v. 17) we read that God gave the four Judeans "knowledge and understanding." Of course, Nebuchadnezzar and those involved in their education would take credit for their brilliance, but Daniel and the others would know to whom the credit was due. This section anticipates the next chapter, where the plot revolves around God's granting wisdom to Daniel through revelation (cf. 2:22). After all, they had grown physically robust not because of their Babylonian diet but because of the grace of God, that is, in spite of their diet of vegetables. The effect of the theme of "God's giving" throughout the chapter is to press home who is really in control of the events of Daniel's life, not to speak of fate of the people of God in general.

For now, however, the divine origin of Daniel's success is understood only in private by the four. Nonetheless, the effect is there for all to see. Just by talking with them, Nebuchadnezzar recognizes that Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (note the narrator's use of the Hebrew names) are far better⁴⁵ than the professional "magicians and enchanters" of Babylon. However, the narrative has let the readers, both ancient and modern, look in on what was going on behind the scene. Thus, we might say that Daniel and his friends' actions are intended not only for themselves but as an example to all of us (see Contemporary Significance).

Commentators through the centuries have been troubled by the description of Daniel's wisdom and especially this comparison to Babylonian wisdom. In the words of Calvin,

we must hold that Daniel had not been seduced to implicate himself completely in those impostures of Satan, for, as we shall soon see, he abstained from the royal food and drink. My opinion is, therefore, that whatever the king may have commanded, Daniel was content with the pure and genuine science of natural things.⁴⁶

After all, the Bible makes clear that the superiority of Israelite wisdom to Babylonian mantic wisdom is not a matter of degree, it is a matter of kind. Babylonian wise men are not so much incompetent as "false." They claim to receive their wisdom from gods whom the Israelites recognize as nonexistent—or worse, from the dark side (Deut. 18:14: "The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination. But as for you, the LORD your God has not permitted you to do so"; cf. Isa. 47).

It is too facile to say that Daniel had nothing to do with this kind of wisdom. While it is true that the four are first characterized by the kind of wisdom associated with the book of Proverbs ("knowledge and understanding"), Daniel himself is associated with a kind of mantic wisdom ("Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds," v. 17). Indeed, we will see that God uses Daniel's specialized knowledge as an instrument for the revelation he gives him later in the book.

The description of Daniel here and his actions later remind us of Joseph, who played a similar role in the court of the Egyptian pharaoh. God blessed him as well with the ability to interpret dreams in a style that even this pagan monarch could recognize. And who can forget the association the narrative makes between Joseph and his divination cup (Gen. 44:5)? God can utilize even the forms of pagan wisdom for his purposes.⁴⁷ As Goldingay points out, "there is no positive theology of pagan or secular learning here, but rather the assurance that it can be triumphed over." The chapters that follow will show Daniel and his friends triumphing again and again over the false wisdom of the Babylonians, both through courtly wisdom (Dan. 3 and 6) and through mantic wisdom (chs. 2, 4, and 5 [not to speak of the second half of the book]).⁴⁹

The Extent of Daniel's Ministry (1:21)

CHAPTER 1, As we have seen, introduces the whole book of Daniel. Daniel is the wise man who, through God's grace, can navigate life's difficulties in the present and peer into the future. It is, therefore, fitting that we get an anticipation of the extent of his work. But the note comes with a difficulty. While the verse situates his life and career in the period between his arrival in Babylon until the first year of Cyrus, the Persian who defeated the Babylonians, Daniel 10:1 locates the concluding vision in the third year of Cyrus.

There are various ways to harmonize 1:21 and 10:1,50 but we should not miss the intention of the verse to identify Daniel as the prophet of the Exile. He spans the entire period, and, as J. Goldingay puts it, thus "outlasts" his conquerors.51 This message provides both encouragement and hope to those alienated from their land with the message that success without compromise was possible even in the midst of captivity.

Bridging Contexts

In the introduction to the chapter, we have already identified the overall theme of this chapter: In spite of present appearances, God is in control. Though the story focuses on the surface level on the actions of the human characters, the chapter primarily intends to teach us about God. He is all-powerful; in a word, he is sovereign. Powerful human figures like Nebuchadnezzar wield tremendous influence and, on one level, control the lives of many people, including Daniel. However, the opening chapter asserts a theme that runs throughout the book as a whole: Real power has a heavenly origin. People like Nebuchadnezzar simply serve his deeper, at times mysterious, purposes.

God's sovereignty displayed subtly but clearly here and elsewhere in the book has as an intended effect to comfort his people. From their limited human perspective, they think they are simply pawns in the hands of hostile forces. Daniel 1 circumvents that false but understandable perception by pointing them to the reality of divine sovereignty.

The teaching on divine sovereignty is the most important lesson of the chapter, but can we go further and learn from Daniel's example of godly behavior in the midst of a hostile environment? Or are his actions so limited to a particular historical occasion that it is illegitimate to transfer anything to our lives today? We have already addressed this issue in a broad way in the introduction to the book, but this is an important place to add a few comments, since we do intend to derive lessons for our lives so many years later from the life of Daniel.

Genre identification and proper interpretation. Genre identification is crucial for proper interpretation and application. We need to know what we are reading in order to understand properly the text's message and claims (if any) on our lives.

On the surface, Daniel's opening chapters appear to inform us about the past. We hear about events that shaped the fate of a whole nation when Babylon exerted its power over Judah and exiled a number of its elite class. We get an account of the first few years of certain members of that elite class as they live in the Babylonian court. We often call such reminiscences of the past "history"—a blanket term to be sure, but one that we understand and that fits with the contents of Daniel 1. Many scholars would call our label simplistic and reductionistic, and they would be correct, but we will save our nuancing for later.

Many teachers and preachers of the historical sections of the Bible make a fundamental error at this point. In their appropriate desire to make these texts touch the lives of those to whom they are speaking, they go immediately to moral teaching of the passage as they understand it. In a moment we will see this is legitimate, though filled with pitfalls. However, we must point out that the primary purpose for these texts is not to teach us how to behave, but rather to point us to God. Daniel is first and foremost a revelation of God. Now, God does not reveal himself to us in the abstract but rather in relationship to his people and through his actions in history. From the very first verses we see that this book is not essentially about Daniel, but rather about God. It is a revelation of who he is and how he acts for our redemption.⁵²

Nonetheless, neither should we ignore the didactic function of the text.⁵³ Several important questions arise as we consider this function. (1) We must address an issue that many Bible writers ask: How can history be normative? In other words, isn't history unique? God may be working in a special way during Daniel's time, but we should not uncritically read about his actions and apply them to ourselves by saying, "Go and act like Daniel!" History is a report of past events, not a blueprint for our behavior. We can marvel at God's great acts, but we cannot presume that they have any direct relationship with us today.

As we will see throughout the first six chapters of Daniel, there is much truth to this principle. We cannot assume that God acts the same way today as he did at the time of Daniel. Nor can we simply use Daniel as a model of our behavior without asking important questions of continuity or discontinuity. Yet it is equally incorrect to say that we should never use historical narrative from the Old Testament as a guide to our faith and

practice today. There is a moral force to these stories of Daniel in captivity that we ignore to our great impoverishment. After all, it is in reference to stories like this one⁵⁴ that Paul stated "these things occurred as examples" (1 Cor. 10:6).

We cannot reduce any Old Testament story to a simple historical report about the past; indeed Old Testament narrative as a whole seems to have a didactic shaping.⁵⁵ That is, they incarnate principles that intend to shape the lives of those who hear these stories.

And what appears to be true of Old Testament narrative in general is pointedly true for Daniel 1–6. Indeed, its didactic function, along with the Joseph story and Esther, have been underlined by scholars who have gone so far as to classify these prose sections as wisdom literature. Wisdom literature proper (e.g., the book of Proverbs) informs its readers of the proper way to navigate life. Just as Joseph in Genesis 39 illustrates how a young man in a compromising situation should act in a way that pleases God, so Daniel and his three friends give insight and guidance to God's people as they confront oppression and the temptations of a godless life. If it is wisdom literature—and this may be doubted, it guides by showing proper behavior as opposed to describing it in the manner of a proverb.

Indeed, there is no better way to learn than by a good story. We can be inspired, encouraged, and emboldened by a story like Daniel's triumph over an impossible situation to live out our own faith with courage. After all, we are not only readers of stories; we live story.⁵⁸

Think about it. When you tell a new friend about yourself, you tell them a story. You have a beginning, a middle, and an end (which is ongoing until your death and someone else tells the story of your life). In other words, you have a plot. Your life is peopled with characters: your parents, friends, supporters, enemies. If you are a Christian, you will give the account of your conversion and your life with Christ. Thus, it is almost impossible for us as story-bearers not to compare our story with the ones we hear, like the story of Daniel.

When we tell the story of our lives truthfully, we are recounting actual events and actual people. Nonetheless, we give it meaning and purpose from the vantage point of the present. We may now see how God had a purpose in a relationship that confused us in the past; we may see patterns in our life that we did not recognize earlier. These purposes and the

situation in which we are speaking will cause us to select certain high points in our life, emphasize some more than others, and interpret them all. Our stories can be both true and shaped.

The same is true of biblical history; the accounts are true, yet shaped. They have a grander purpose than mere historical recollection, but this does not denigrate their essential historical accuracy.⁵⁹ The Daniel account is shaped so that our stories may come into contact with Daniel's story with the result that we may be changed by it.

(2) How are we changed by the story of Daniel 1? Before answering that question directly, we must acknowledge that, though these "things occurred as examples" for us (1 Cor. 10:6), there are also elements of discontinuity we must take into account, both here and in the chapters to follow. While affirming a didactic element to these chapters, we must also acknowledge that Old Testament stories do more than give us examples. They are more than just individual stories that teach us how to behave; they are part of a greater story, the story of God's redemption of his people. They are a part, to use a term common among theologians, of the history of redemption. The story of Daniel is a window on the Exile, an important event in redemptive history.

God had formed a special relationship with the descendants of Abraham and had given the patriarch a promise (Gen. 12:2–3):

I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you;
I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

God later followed through on these promises. For instance, later in history Abraham's descendants had indeed become a nation, and at the time of the Exodus Moses constituted them as such. But these promises, freely given, also entailed a response of gratitude, perhaps most concretely expressed through the law later spelled out in the Ten Commandments and

the case law that flowed from them. That law was accompanied by blessings and curses for obedience and disobedience. Among those curses for disobedience were some that warned of a cataclysmic judgment that could come on the people of God. Typical of these is Deuteronomy 28:64–68.

Then the LORD will scatter you among all nations, from one end of the earth to the other. There you will worship other gods—gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known. Among those nations you will find no repose, no resting place for the sole of your foot. There the LORD will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life. In the morning you will say, "If only it were evening!" and in the evening, "If only it were morning!"—because of the terror that will fill your hearts and the sights that your eyes will see. The LORD will send you back in ships to Egypt on a journey I said you should never make again. There you will offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but no one will buy you.

The prophets of the period just before the Exile warned the people of Judah that such a cataclysm threatened them because of their disregard for their relationship with God as manifest in their disobedience to the law. The author of Lamentations understood the destruction of Jerusalem as the fulfillment of this and other curses. Daniel's personal exile was an anticipation of the national catastrophe.

In other words, the story of Daniel informs the reader that Nebuchadnezzar's intrusion into Judah was not a historical accident. God gave Jehoiakim into that pagan king's hands, after all. But without denying that the Exile was indeed an experience of God's judgment, Daniel 1 also reveals that God had not abandoned his people altogether. He was not only with the faithful in exile, but as with Joseph in the Egyptian prison, God

was blessing them, allowing them to succeed in what might be considered nearly impossible situations.

Continuity and discontinuity. As we will see more clearly later, Daniel 1 anticipates a theme that flows from the promise to Abraham. We begin to see what becomes explicit in the next chapter: Abraham's descendants will be a blessing to the nations.

When reading the Old Testament as history of redemption, we must be careful to read it first from the vantage point of the time of its composition. If we do not, we will easily distort its message. However, for those who read from the stance of Christian faith we must continue, because we have more of the story. Jesus himself instructed his disciples that the Old Testament had a future dimension that pointed toward himself (Luke 24:25–27, 44–49). Not that every verse or even every chapter of the Old Testament has a specific anticipation of Christ, but we must read the Old Testament, including the stories about Daniel, with an eye to the fulfillment of redemptive history in Christ.

As we read the account of Daniel in the Babylonian and, later, the Persian courts, we must acknowledge another important element of discontinuity with our moment in redemptive history. Daniel and his friends lived their lives of faith at a time when God's people were defined as an ethnic group and a distinct political entity. In a word, God's people were a nation, admittedly at the time of Daniel a nation without independent existence, but a nation nonetheless. After Christ, God's people can no longer be so identified. God's people today are the church. A much less tangible entity than a nation, the church spans ethnic, political, and national boundaries.

Unfortunately, this distinction is often lost today, especially in America, where some still think it is possible to speak of an essentially Christian nation founded on (Judeo-) Christian principles. This point is crucial for our understanding of Daniel and Daniel 1 in particular, where a fundamental issue is the relationship between faith and culture. Daniel teaches us that the struggle is not to make the culture Christian, but how a Christian can live in a hostile culture.

As we read the story of Daniel from the perspective of the New Testament and ask how we as Christians can learn from the example of Daniel, we will see how these elements of discontinuity work themselves out in such concrete instances as Daniel's bold decision not to eat the food provided by the king. Even though we have concluded that the core issue is not keeping kosher, we can learn from Acts 10 and 15, as well as 1 Corinthians 8 (cf. v. 8 "... food does not bring us near to God, we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do") that preoccupation with a distinctive diet is a characteristic of the Old Testament people of God, not the New. However, the principle of continuity will drive us to ask ourselves where God is calling on us to make a stand of faith in the midst of our constantly changing culture, a prospect frightening as well as exciting.

Contemporary Significance

Daniel 1 thrusts us into an issue of contemporary significance that continues into the following chapters. For that reason, though this essay will be self-contained, we will not give an exhaustive discussion here. The reader interested in the insight that the book as a whole throws on the question of the relationship between faith and culture will have to read the commentary on the following chapters as well. Here, however, we will lay the groundwork and will refer in later chapters to the discussion found here.

God is in control. God reveals himself in the midst of the action of Daniel 1. We have seen that while on the level of human observation Nebuchadnezzar's military prowess wins the day, the Bible takes us behind the scene and shows us that God is in control. God is sovereign and he is also immanent in the world. He directs the world by his providence. This is true not only on the battlefield, but also in Daniel's classroom in the royal court. God also is the one who distributes wisdom, choosing to endow Daniel and the three friends with a special measure of it to further his purposes in history.

Relationship between faith and culture. But how does Daniel 1 address us in our everyday life? In answer, it is striking how the contemporary church finds itself in a situation similar to Daniel's. We too live in a strange land. We have seen how Daniel was taken from the shadow of the temple and forced to live in a land that worshiped idols. Babylonia under Nebuchadnezzar ultimately went further, tore down that temple in 587 B.C., and destroyed Daniel's homeland. Daniel (and the other exiles) enjoyed some measure of freedom and reputation in the land of his captivity, but he still lived in a culture that was hostile toward everything he held dear in his

heart. The dichotomy between his belief and the belief of those in power is evident in this first chapter and will intensify throughout the book.

Christians today should understand that we too live in a "toxic" culture, that is, a culture that stands at odds with our faith. The god of modern culture is not the God of the Bible, but is ultimately the self. This strange god demands worship that creates values different than those of Christianity. Since the individual is at the heart of the worship of secular culture, personal gratification and self-realization are prized over any sense of the other person, any sense of community, whether that community is the family, the church, the city, the nation, or the global community.

This picture, of course, is a simplification and generalization. The world does not divide neatly into Christian and secular. Especially in this day of growing spirituality, the non-Christian world is varied. Those of us who live in big cities daily rub shoulders not only with thoroughgoing atheists and agnostics, but also with Muslims, people of Jewish faith, and those who practice a vague sort of spirituality that they refuse to put into traditional categories.

For a variety of reasons, however, the public face of our culture is predominantly secular. Since, in the United States at least, our founders thought it in the best interest of religion to keep government separate, God has become at best a buzzword in public policy and law. Moreover, because of the virtual withdrawal of Christians from the media, such things as movies, television, mainstream music, and journalism reflect the mood and opinions of those who bracket or reject God.

The lines are not always clear, but most thoughtful Christians recognize a difference between their beliefs and values and those esteemed by the culture at large. Indeed, many Christians have a sense of oppression and even hostility as they live their lives in the public square. The term *culture* war has recently been coined to describe the clash of values between people of faith and those who define what is right and wrong without reference to a higher being, more specifically the God of the Bible. In an insightful and provocative description of this conflict, James Davison Hunter of the University of Virginia has delineated the five fronts along which this war is waged: the family, education, popular media, law, and electoral politics.⁶¹

To highlight just one specific issue among many, note contrasting attitudes toward homosexuality. Many today believe that homosexuality is a

legitimate alternative lifestyle, to be respected and treated like heterosexuality. Philadelphia, the city in which I lived until recently, has just recognized the gay partners of city employees by granting them spousal benefits. On the other side of the culture war, the place where Christians often find themselves, are those who are not ready to acknowledge homosexuality as simply an alternative to heterosexuality. In opposing what they see as a trend of "secular" culture, they believe that they protect the institution of the family, at least as traditionally defined.

The tensions are deep and more complex than I am able to describe here. Nonetheless, only the most insensitive could miss that there is a profound sense of division in our society, and Christians often find themselves out of sync with the bulk of culture.

Let me be clear at this point. I am not making a simple identification between the Christian church, or even the more narrowly defined evangelical Christian church, and the agenda of the religious right, even though the culture war in large part is defined, legitimately, as a struggle between the religious right and the rest of society. But no matter what their political orientation, whether conservative or liberal, Christians will find themselves at odds with the values and beliefs of the broader culture just by virtue of their ultimate allegiance to a God who is bigger than themselves.

What can the book of Daniel contribute to our own struggle and sense of identity in a modern secular world? Not only does it reflect a similar tension between God's people and the "world" (to use the language of Paul), it gives us insight into how we should interact with the world—and it does this in a surprising way, in part by undermining many of our current attitudes and practices. As we will see, the book does not simply give us a pattern of behavior as much as opens our eyes to multiple strategies for cultural engagement.

Many Christians today advocate only one stance toward culture: resistance. Ask a fairly knowledgeable passerby how the evangelical Christian church interacts with culture, and they will respond with one word: "coercion." The culture war often takes on the mantle of a holy war as Christians mobilize their forces to resist the encroachment of secularization against the family and society in schools, government, and media.

That picture cannot be blamed simply on the selective portrayal of the media, showing Christians participating in picket lines, blockades, and boycotts, with cameras focusing on faces shaking with rage screaming at those who are destroying God, country, and family. These reports may be sensationalized, but they are nonetheless in essence accurate. Most of these efforts at coercion target legislation, working through the democratic system, but with dangerously increasing frequency the coercion takes on the frightening dimensions of violence: abortion clinics in Atlanta bombed; a doctor shot in the back in Pensacola. Would that these were always the act of fringe Christians groups, but that would be a lie.⁶²

This is a picture of the Christian interacting with the broader society through resistance—sometimes using the tools of the democratic system, sometimes going outside of the rules. Many, including myself, would argue that this is the predominant paradigm practiced by the evangelical Christian community today. But it is not the only one by which Christian interaction with culture can be described.

In a classic study, H. Richard Niebuhr described five different patterns, and the pattern I have just described fits into the category he calls "Christ Against Culture." Culture and Christianity are two different, hostile approaches to the world. As with any assault, the church has a choice of two alternatives: fight or flight. Since the evangelical church has grown in recent years, it has often chosen to flex its muscles, but some Christians have nonetheless chosen withdrawal, fitting into a second paradigm of Niebuhr. This latter may be illustrated on an individual level by Frank, a friend of mine, who threw his television out a window when he caught a look at a music video his children were watching one night, and, in the extreme, by the approach of the Amish, who eschew much modern technology as represented by their use of horse-and-buggy rather than automobile. The wilderness areas of many of our Western states are populated by people whose faith has led them to leave the evil influences of our cities and towns.

Perhaps on the extreme opposite end of the spectrum are those Christians who embrace culture—"The Christ of Culture." This is not the route taken by the vast majority of evangelical Christians, but it is the conscious or unconscious strategy of many others. Niebuhr himself pointed to advocates of the social gospel in the earlier part of our century, and Yancey cites

modern advocates of liberation theology, who understand their Bibles through the lens of Marxist political thought. It would be wrong to label such people as mere sycophants of culture. They are rather selective in their understanding of what the Bible teaches in terms of love, toleration of others, and the value of biblical justice. Many perhaps fall into this pattern because they are afraid to be different or maybe they just want to fit in.

Another of Niebuhr's categories is "Christ and Culture in Paradox." In this model church and society have separate, but legitimate spheres. We obey Christ in the church and the political leaders in our public, community life. After all, didn't Paul state as much in Romans 13:1–7? He begins by exhorting his readers to "obey the government" and continues by telling us to "pay your taxes." This advice seems reasonable until we realize that church and society often put opposing demands in front of us. Luther was Niebuhr's prime example of this approach, and the logic of his thought led to Christians who collaborated in the atrocities of Hitler during World War II. While the example of Christian Nazis is often taken as the end of the discussion since it is such a reprehensible recollection, we still have to deal with Paul's words in Romans. He does tell us to obey the government after all.

Then there is the view most frequently associated with Calvin and his intellectual descendants, the *transformation* of culture. Working from within culture, Christians operate as agents of positive change. Here we must comment that Niebuhr's five categories are rarely found in pure form. There is often a thin line of separation between them. Yancey offers Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658) as an example of this fifth way. Cromwell was the leader of the largely Puritan Civil War against King Charles I of England. Indeed, Cromwell did transform culture from the inside. Though he was tolerant to some other religions (Quakers, for instance), the strongly Calvinist Cromwell could also be vehemently anti-Catholic and was known to deface the statuary of churches and cathedrals, considering them idolatrous. Transformation can sometimes pass over into coercion.

We do not present the above categories with the intent to argue that one model is *the* biblical model. We offer them as a background on which to compare contemporary Christian strategies with Daniel's actions.

In the Original Meaning section, we observed how Daniel takes a stand and places himself against his culture. But what occasioned surprise was the extent to which he exposed himself to the pagan thinking and culture that surrounded him. Moreover, we are shocked by the great effort he took to keep his distinctiveness quiet. Daniel was no Origen, the third-century theologian, who as a young man desired to throw himself in front of the emperor's chariot and proclaim Christ so he could achieve the glory of a martyr's death. Neither was Daniel a Jerome, who fled to a monastery to avoid worldly pollution or, when feeling the unwanted arousal of sexual stimulation, would throw himself into a thorny bush.

Daniel endured much cultural assimilation, yet he knew where it was appropriate for him to draw the line of distinction. The text implies that Daniel acted in a right manner for his situation. The narrative applauds his growth in wisdom. Not only that, but as we will see in the following chapters, Daniel also had wonderful opportunities to make even bolder statements of his faith.

Once again, Daniel is not given to us as a model of the one biblical way for the believer to interact with his or her culture. Rather, when viewed in the light of the rest of Scripture, Daniel imparts the liberating, yet frightening news that there are multiple ways to be a believer in an unbelieving world. Much depends on the person and his or her specific cultural situation.

Christ and our relationship with the world. After all, what is Christ's teaching on how faith acts in the world? This is a topic that deserves booklength treatment, but I would like to bring to mind two key aspects of his teaching. Jesus calls us to be "in the world, but not of it" (cf. John 17:16), but also to be as "shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matt. 10:16).

(1) Jesus spoke a paradox when he taught that though we are "in the world" (John 17:11, 15), we are, like him, not "of it" (17:14, 16). Indeed, Jesus is the one who has sent us into the world (17:18) with the purpose that the world "may believe that you have sent me" (17:21). To use another biblical image of our involvement with the present world, we are "resident aliens" (cf. Phil. 3:20).

But notice the leeway provided in Jesus' statement. It is a general principle that can be lived out in a variety of ways. What does it mean, to take a concrete example, in the area of the education of our children? All of us who have had children have struggled with the decision of how best to educate them. Schools have a huge impact on the development of our

children's thinking and life direction, and there are many who will tell you that there is one, and only one, correct answer to that question. Some will say that a Christian school is the only proper choice. We want our children not only to avoid the thinking of secular humanism found in the public school system, but also to construct a positive, biblically centered understanding of the world.

Others, some because of the lack of a Christian school option and others because they believe even the Christian schools have imbibed the spirit of the age, advocate home-schooling. Occasionally a brave soul will even suggest that the public school, with all of its potential pitfalls, is the only way to go to prevent the "ghettoization" of the church, and prepare our children for "life in the real world."

Looking at this question in the light of Christ's admonition to be "in the world, but not of it" and with an eye on Daniel's success in a truly pagan educational environment does not allow us to answer this question with dogmatism. There is no single answer to this question for all people of faith at every stage of a child's development. Too much depends on the child, the school system, the parents, the church, and so much more. We can be "in the world, but not of it" in the local public school, the Christian school, or the home school.

How many of us wish that the answer was simple and clear-cut, not only in this issue but in all the issues of faith and culture that bombard us daily. What movies and television shows are appropriate for me to watch? What magazines can I read? What music can I listen to? How protective of my children should I be?

Some may feel that we are advocating a kind of relativism here and in this way have imbibed the spirit of the day ourselves. We must be quick to say that there are some areas where our stand against culture should be clear and unequivocal in the light of biblical teaching. Though our culture permits it, it is not right to choose to have an abortion to avoid the embarrassment or the annoyance of an unwanted pregnancy. Though our culture permits it, it is not right to have an active sexual lifestyle outside of the institution of marriage. Though our culture permits it, it is not right to engage in homosexual acts of intimacy. But even here there are questions, not about our own behavior, but about our reactions to the behavior of

others. What is the appropriate Christian response to the legalization of abortion? To the legitimization of homosexual relationships?

Once again we hear from Christians who say there is only one possible biblical response. Some advocate coercion through legislation or even violence as the only proper response. A note of urgency is heard from some of the leaders of the church that it is of the utmost necessity not only to refrain from sinful activity ourselves but make sure that no one in our country sins either. They point to the Old Testament and the law's demand on Israel, as a political entity, to be morally pure.

It is at this point that we need to remind ourselves that no modern nation, whether America, England, Korea, or whatever, is in a situation like Israel (see Bridging Contexts section). America is not a Christian nation; there is no such thing as a Christian nation. America is more like Babylon in Daniel's day or Rome in Jesus' day than Israel. We need to listen to the wise words of Martin Lloyd-Jones, who had the following insightful words for those who wanted to legislate Christian morality:

The New Testament is never interested in conduct and behaviour in itself. I can go further and say that the New Testament does not make an appeal for good behaviour to anyone but to Christian people. The New Testament is not interested, as such, in morality of the world. It tells us quite plainly that you can expect nothing from the world but sin, and that in its fallen condition it is incapable of anything else. In Titus 3:3 Paul tells us that we were all once like that: "for we sometimes foolish. ourselves were disobedient. deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another...." Thus there is nothing, according to the New Testament, that is so fatuous and so utterly futile, as to turn to such people and appeal to them to live the Christian life.... The truth is that it only has one message for people like that—the message of repentance.66

Lloyd-Jones gives us the healthy reminder that God is not interested in lives of external conformity to his will, but hearts that lead to thankful obedience.

(2) But this does not mean we withdraw from a dangerous and hostile world. In Matthew 10:16 Jesus calls his disciples "sheep" and the rest of the world "wolves," but he demands courage from his sheep to take the risk to live among the wolves. In the process, he gives them a strategy, using two more animal metaphors: "Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves." We are to be innocent and shrewd as we live out the issues of faith in our culture. And does this not describe Daniel perfectly? Daniel certainly was innocent. He mounted no angry assault on his captors; rather, he acted quite civilly. He was virtually serpent-like in his crafty strategy to remain faithful in a land antithetical to his deeply held faith. As the story continues, we will observe that Daniel not only remained faithful but exercised significant influence on the godless world around him. 68

Daniel 2:1-49

¹In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his mind was troubled and he could not sleep. ²So the king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed. When they came in and stood before the king, ³he said to them, "I have had a dream that troubles me and I want to know what it means."

⁴Then the astrologers answered the king in Aramaic, "O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will interpret it."

⁵The king replied to the astrologers, "This is what I have firmly decided: If you do not tell me what my dream was and interpret it, I will have you cut into pieces and your houses turned into piles of rubble. ⁶But if you tell me the dream and explain it, you will receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor. So tell me the dream and interpret it for me."

⁷Once more they replied, "Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will interpret it."

⁸Then the king answered, "I am certain that you are trying to gain time, because you realize that this is what I have firmly decided: ⁹If you do not tell me the dream, there is just one penalty for you. You have conspired to tell me misleading and wicked things, hoping the situation will change. So then, tell me the dream, and I will know that you can interpret it for me."

¹⁰The astrologers answered the king, "There is not a man on earth who can do what the king asks! No king, however great and mighty, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or astrologer.

¹¹What the king asks is too difficult. No one can

reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among men."

¹²This made the king so angry and furious that he ordered the execution of all the wise men of Babylon. ¹³So the decree was issued to put the wise men to death, and men were sent to look for Daniel and his friends to put them to death.

¹⁴When Arioch, the commander of the king's guard, had gone out to put to death the wise men of Babylon, Daniel spoke to him with wisdom and tact. ¹⁵He asked the king's officer, "Why did the king issue such a harsh decree?" Arioch then explained the matter to Daniel. ¹⁶At this, Daniel went in to the king and asked for time, so that he might interpret the dream for him.

¹⁷Then Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. ¹⁸He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that he and his friends might not be executed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon. ¹⁹During the night the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision. Then Daniel praised the God of heaven ²⁰and said:

"Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever;

wisdom and power are his.

²¹He changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them.

He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning.

²²He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him.

²³I thank and praise you, O God of my fathers:

You have given me wisdom and power, you have made known to me what we asked of you, you have made known to us the dream of the king."

²⁴Then Daniel went to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to execute the wise men of Babylon, and said to him, "Do not execute the wise men of Babylon. Take me to the king, and I will interpret his dream for him."

²⁵Arioch took Daniel to the king at once and said, "I have found a man among the exiles from Judah who can tell the king what his dream means."

²⁶The king asked Daniel (also called Belteshazzar), "Are you able to tell me what I saw in my dream and interpret it?"

²⁷Daniel replied, "No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, ²⁸but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come. Your dream and the visions that passed through your mind as you lay on your bed are these:

²⁹"As you were lying there, O king, your mind turned to things to come, and the revealer of mysteries showed you what is going to happen. ³⁰As for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because I have greater wisdom than other living men, but so that you, O king, may know the interpretation and that you may understand what went through your mind.

³¹"You looked, O king, and there before you stood a large statue—an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. ³²The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver,

its belly and thighs of bronze, ³³its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. ³⁴While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. ³⁵Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were broken to pieces at the same time and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.

³⁶"This was the dream, and now we will interpret it to the king. ³⁷You, O king, are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; ³⁸in your hands he has placed mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. You are that head of gold.

³⁹"After you, another kingdom will rise, inferior to yours. Next, a third kingdom, one of bronze, will rule over the whole earth. ⁴⁰Finally, there will be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron—for iron breaks and smashes everything—and as iron breaks things to pieces, so it will crush and break all the others. ⁴¹Just as you saw that the feet and toes were partly of baked clay and partly of iron, so this will be a divided kingdom; yet it will have some of the strength of iron in it, even as you saw iron mixed with clay. ⁴²As the toes were partly iron and partly clay, so this kingdom will be partly strong and partly brittle. ⁴³And just as you saw the iron mixed with baked clay, so the people will be a mixture and will not remain united, any more than iron mixes with clay.

⁴⁴"In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed,

nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. ⁴⁵This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands—a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces.

"The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true and the interpretation is trustworthy."

⁴⁶Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honor and ordered that an offering and incense be presented to him. ⁴⁷The king said to Daniel, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery."

⁴⁸Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men. ⁴⁹Moreover, at Daniel's request the king appointed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego administrators over the province of Babylon, while Daniel himself remained at the royal court.

Original Meaning

Daniel 2 presents a second self-contained story—a story best remembered by the bizarrely constructed (at least by modern tastes) statue that dominates Nebuchadnezzar's dream. However, we must not let our curiosity concerning God's revelation of future events distract us from the main theme of the chapter: *Only God's wisdom can reveal the mysteries of life*. In other words, it is not the content of the revelation of the future that is primary; what is most important here is the fact that it is only Daniel's God that knows that future. And God's knowledge of the future is particularly important to a people in exile and under some measure of oppression, because it implies that he controls history. Once again, therefore, we are

reminded of the overall theme of this book: In spite of present appearances, God is in control.

As we read Daniel 2, the Joseph narrative in Genesis 41, which closely parallels this chapter, quickly comes to mind. In Genesis a pagan king, the Egyptian pharaoh, has an anxiety-producing dream (concerning seven lean and seven fat cows). When the wise men of Egypt cannot interpret the dream for him, his cupbearer (paralleling the role of Arioch in Dan. 2) helps him discover a dream-interpreter, who turns out to be the imprisoned Joseph. Through God's help, Joseph reveals the interpretation of the dream to the pharaoh, resulting in his rise in status in the foreign court.

We thus see that Daniel is like Joseph, perhaps even better than Joseph, since he not only interprets the dream but, with God's help, actually tells the king the contents of the dream. Both Joseph and Daniel serve as models for godly behavior to God's people who live in a foreign culture (for implications see the Contemporary Significance section to Daniel 1). Goldingay nicely summarizes the lesson in regard to Daniel when he describes him as

a model of Israelite wisdom (v. 14) and a model of Israelite piety, in his prayer (v. 18), his vision (v. 19), his praise (vv. 19–23), his witness (vv. 27–28), his self-effacement (v. 30), his conviction (v. 45); the fruit of his work is not merely rewards and promotion (v. 48) but obeisance and recognition of his God (vv. 46–47).²

The genre of chapter 2 has been rightly identified by W. Lee Humphreys as a "court tale of contest." The setting is the court, and the plot surrounds a contest of interpretation. The rivals are, on the surface of it, Daniel and the king's advisors, but more profoundly the contest is between the true God and the idols that the king's advisors worship.

The first contest is between Daniel and the king's advisors. The latter are confronted with a problem for which they are totally unprepared. They are diviners (*baru*), not seers or prophets. They deal with omens, including revelatory dreams; they do not receive revelation. In divination, the gods inform humans through the diviner's interpretation of sheep livers, abnormal births, the stars, and dreams. Dreams can be solicited through

incubation rites or are unsolicited—as here apparently. They can interpret dreams, and they have books that will help them do that, but there is no way they can find out the content of the dream if the king does not tell them the actual dream.⁵ Daniel is also trained in this lore, but he is able to go further, not because of his training or the reference books he shares with the Babylonian diviners, but because his God is a God who can reveal it to him. It is at this point that the contrast between Daniel's God and the gods of the Babylonian diviners comes into play.

In this regard, we can observe another Scripture text with which Daniel 2 has special association. In Isaiah 40–48, the prophet Isaiah ridicules the nations' idols. The idols are impotent to effect history (Isa. 46:6–7):

Some pour out gold from their bags and weigh out silver on the scales; they hire a goldsmith to make it into a god, and they bow down and worship it.

They lift it to their shoulders and carry it; they set it up in its place, and there it stands. From that spot it cannot move.

Though one cries out to it, it does not answer; it cannot save him from his troubles.

The pagan advisors are blind to the future (47:13–14a):

All the counsel you have received has only worn you out!

Let your astrologers come forward,
those stargazers who make predictions month by month,
let them save you from what is coming upon you.
Surely they are like stubble; the fire will burn them up.

God, by contrast, both controls history and can reveal it to his servants (46:9–10):

Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me.

I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come.

I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.

The outline of Daniel 2 is as follows: (1) the king and his advisors (2:1–13); (2) God's revealing of the mystery to Daniel (2:14–23); (3) the dream and its interpretation (2:24–45); and (4) the king's response (2:46–49).

The King and His Advisors (2:1–13)

SIMILAR TO DANIEL 1, this second chapter begins with a chronological note that is difficult to harmonize with our general knowledge of the period. A definite answer eludes us again, though we are able to provide a possible harmonization.⁶

The first verse sets the scene in the second year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, whereas the first chapter says that Daniel's training lasted for three years (1:5). Even assuming (as we argued in ch. 1) that the training began in Nebuchadnezzar's accession year, this is difficult to reconcile with 2:1. After all, since Daniel was included among the condemned "wise men" (2:14) and was living outside the court, the assumption is that he had already graduated.

Both Wood and Young offer different explanations to resolve the tension. The former suggests a scenario in which chapter 2 describes events that took place during Daniel's training.⁷ The latter argues that if we accept that three years may include partial years, the two chronological notes can be reconciled. He provides the following chart to make his point clear:⁸

Year of Daniel's training Nebuchadnezzar

First year Year of Accession

Second year First year

Third year Second year (in which dream occurred)

We have commented on these historical conundrums because they cause close readers to stumble. The purpose of the chronological markers, however, is not primary to the story. They merely set the scene; having addressed the issue, we pass on to the message of the passage.⁹

Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that disturbed him greatly, so he called his professionals—not psychologists, of course, but the ancient equivalents, "the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers." These professionals had dream interpretation on their list of responsibilities. Indeed, these people were the political consultants, trend spotters, and religious gurus of the day.

Babylonian religion encouraged looking for portents of the future in dreams and the fantastic occurrences of everyday life. Indications of future trends and events could be found in the skies, bizarre births, the shape of animal livers, and—as here—in dreams. It is in the latter that Babylonian religion and Daniel's faith come closest, and perhaps that is why God chose to speak to Nebuchadnezzar in this way rather than through the birth of a multiheaded ox. After all, God had spoken through dreams in the past (e.g., Gen. 28:10–22; 1 Kings 3:5), but not through other means of divination so popular in Babylonia.

The difference between these modes of revelation is profound, and in this difference we see a radical contrast between the false religion of the Babylonians and the true religion of Daniel. Biblical prophecy, which occasionally includes dreams, is the result of divine initiative and revelation; the other means of divination, practiced so strenuously by the Babylonians but condemned by the Bible (cf. Deut. 18:14), is the result of human initiation or manipulation (i.e., the pouring of oil in water). Dream interpretation is one mode of divine revelation understood by Babylonians¹⁰ and accepted by pious Israelites.

But even with royal dreams in Babylon, there was a protocol that allowed for interpretation. It required the king to inform the professional interpreters of the content of his dream, but Nebuchadnezzar angrily refuses to satisfy the interpreters' urgent pleas to tell them the contents of his dream; this refusal puts the diviners in an awkward, even dangerous situation.

The biblical text does not clearly state why Nebuchadnezzar refuses to describe the contents of the dream to his interpreters, leading to two different understandings of his motivation." Some commentators believe

Nebuchadnezzar has forgotten the dream. He is disturbed, knows he has had a dream, but does not remember exactly what the dream is about.¹² Such a view, however, does not do justice to the anger of the king.¹³ His reaction to the diviners' request to supply them with the content of the dream indicates that Nebuchadnezzar is testing their integrity. He realizes how easy it is to provide an interpretation of a symbolic dream and wants to assure himself of their authenticity by demanding that they also tell him something that only he himself knows, the actual contents of the dream.¹⁴

In spite of the reason, however, no doubt attends the divine intention that stands behind the royal stubbornness. In their exasperation, the diviners themselves utter the statement that sets up the main lesson of the chapter: "There is not a man on earth who can do what the king asks! No king, however great and mighty, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or astrologer. What the king asks is too difficult. No one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among men" (Dan. 2:10–11). With that, the king orders all the "wise men" in Babylonia, present in the court or not, put to death. The glove is thrown to the ground; Daniel and his friends are put on the chopping block. How will God resolve this dangerous situation?

God's Revealing of the Mystery to Daniel (2:14–23)

ARIOCH, THE COMMANDER of the king's guard, has no choice but to follow through on Nebuchadnezzar's command to execute the wise men. His mission leads him to Daniel, who, being a wise man himself, is included among those scheduled for death.

Arioch's words may have shocked Daniel, but the text does not inform us that he reacts that way. As in the first chapter when his strategy for remaining faithful in a hostile court was thwarted, Daniel responds calmly and with confidence. He navigates life "with wisdom and tact" (v. 14) even when, as in this case, confronted with a threat of gargantuan proportions. Daniel is truly the paradigmatic person of wisdom.

Arioch informs Daniel on the situation that brings him to his doorstep. Daniel hears of the king's dream, the interpreters' inability to discern its contents and their impotence in interpretation. After winning some time, he returned to his house, where he meets with his three friends, here given their Hebrew names: Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. He knows that they

have only one recourse, prayer. The Babylonian sages were only half right. While no human being could ever tell the king the contents and interpretation of his dream, God can, and, in contrast to the beliefs of the Babylonians (2:11), there is a God who lives among people: Daniel's God.

The four faithful Israelites prayed to God to reveal the "mystery" to them. In general, a mystery is something beyond human comprehension. In this context, of course, it has become painfully obvious that Nebuchadnezzar's dream is such a mystery. If Daniel and the others are to have their lives spared, God will have to tell them what to say. That night Daniel's God speaks to him and describes to him the dream and its interpretation. Before rushing off to the court, Daniel prays again—this time not a petition for help, but a thanksgiving song.¹⁵

In his prayer, Daniel highlights two aspects of God's character that play a pivotal role in this chapter, and indeed throughout the book. (1) God is powerful. Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar, its king, seem to have all the power on the human plane. They presume to have control over Israel and Daniel, but the prophet recognizes the truth of the matter. Nebuchadnezzar himself is a king because God is the One who "sets up kings and deposes them" (2:21).

(2) God is wise. Indeed, Daniel understands that his wisdom is derivative from God's. The revelation of the mystery has made that clear. The "wisdom and tact" that we earlier saw him display toward Ashpenaz and then Arioch might be confused with the common sense available to any sensitive human being, but the ability to describe someone else's dream can only come from a divine source. He is the One who "reveals deep and hidden things" (2:22).

Armed with this answer to prayer,¹⁶ Daniel then sets out with Arioch to the royal court.

The Dream and Its Interpretation (2:24–45)

AFTER THANKING GOD for hearing his prayer, Daniel informs Arioch that he has the answer needed to preserve the wisdom teachers, including himself, from Nebuchadnezzar's decree of death. Calvin devotes some time to justifying Daniel's haste. After all, these wise men teach falsehood and advocate idolatry; in Calvin's opinion, they deserved to die, even if not for the reason that moves Nebuchadnezzar. Calvin appeals to Daniel's sense of

honesty to justify his letting the idolaters off the hook. Daniel would have preferred their death, but not for unjust reasons. Against Calvin, we would suggest that Daniel's actions here and elsewhere in the book incarnate a love for enemies (Ex. 23:4–5) that the Old Testament mandates and Jesus later advocates (Luke 6:27).

Arioch brings Daniel into the presence of Nebuchadnezzar. The king gets right to the point: "Are you able to tell me what I saw in my dream and interpret it?"

Daniel responds in a way that puts the focus where it belongs, not on himself but directly on God. This solution has been anticipated by the inability of the Babylonian wisdom teachers, who said that the answer could only come from the divine realm (v. 11). Now Daniel bears witness to the God who speaks the life-granting answer; he is the "God in heaven who reveals mysteries" (v. 28). He then proceeds with a description of the content of the king's vision. The report of the dream is given first, followed by its interpretation. However, even within the description are indications of the interpretation. In particular, Daniel makes it clear that the vision concerns the future (vv. 28–29).

The dream is of a huge statue. As Collins points out, "apparitions of gigantic figures are characteristic of ancient Near Eastern dreams." Besides its size, the statue is striking by virtue of its composition. Its head is gold; its chest and arms silver, while its belly and thighs are bronze and its legs iron. The feet are themselves composite, made of both iron and clay. While in one sense there is nothing exactly like this composite statue in ancient literature, we can note similarities. There is a tradition of recounting world history by means of metals of declining value as early as Hesiod in his *Works and Days*, composed in the eighth century B.C.¹⁹

The statue is not the only character in the vision. Daniel next describes a rock whose origins are mysteriously described in a negative way, made "not by human hands" (v. 34). Our first thought is that if it is not human, it must be divine, but confirmation awaits the interpretation that follows.

With two characters, we now have a plot. The rock smashes into the feet of the statue, which is obviously the weak link. This imposing figure is thus reduced to near nothingness, so that the wind can blow it away. After this, the rock becomes a huge mountain, filling the whole world.

In verse 36, Daniel moves from dream report to dream interpretation, and we begin on solid interpretive ground. Speaking to Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel says, "You are that head of gold" (v. 38). Nebuchadnezzar must have rejoiced at this news. After all, in the scheme of "things to come" he was at the top, represented by the most precious of all metals. In the light of this news, it is hard to see why some commentators wonder why Nebuchadnezzar responds so well to the dream as a whole. While the head of gold will be replaced and eventually pass away, nonetheless for the moment Nebuchadnezzar is on top. His reaction may be compared to that of Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:19) when he heard that, despite hardships to come to his descendants, his own reign would be characterized by "peace and security."

After Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel interprets the remaining metals as symbolic of nations rather than individual kings.²⁰ The identity of the following kingdoms has been much debated over the centuries, particularly in the past hundred years. The interpretation of the kingdoms of Daniel 2 is closely related to the interpretation of Daniel 7 (the four hybrid beasts), which in turn is related to the identity of the goat and the ram in Daniel 8. In order to get a more complete explanation of the interpretive stance we are taking in Daniel 2, the reader is encouraged to read the comments on those relevant chapters as well.

Historically, two main approaches have dominated: the Greek view and the Roman view. The latter is understood to be the traditional viewpoint and often appeals to the New Testament for support. This approach sees the following pattern:

Head of gold = Nebuchadnezzar (Babylon) Arms and chest of silver = Medo-Persian empire Belly and thighs of bronze = Greek empire Legs of iron = Roman empire

This view is held by conservative scholars in the main; nonconservatives have trouble with this approach because even they, for the most part, believe Daniel 2 was written before Rome was a major player on the world scene. Since (in their view) predictive prophecy does not occur,²¹ they cannot believe that the fourth kingdom is Rome. Typically, then, in the

Greek view, the Medes and the Persians are treated as the second and third kingdoms respectively. The Greek kingdom is fourth. The mixed character of the toes then refers to the political situation in Egypt and the Levant after the death of Alexander, when the Ptolomies and the Seleucids vie for control of Palestine. More specifically, the attempts at mixture in verse 43 is a symbolic reference to attempts at intermarriage.²²

However, the interpretive situation is not as clear as the last paragraph might lead us to believe. It is not simply a matter of all traditional-conservative scholars holding to the Roman view and all nonconservatives arguing for the Greek view. Recently, strong evangelical arguments have been put forward for the Greek view.²³ Furthermore, there is significant disagreement among conservative interpreters concerning such details as the significance of the ten toes.²⁴

In the light of this interpretive confusion, we must entertain seriously the idea that the vision of Daniel 2 does not intend to be precise as it writes its history before it occurs. In other words, though it starts in the concrete present, it is a wrong strategy to proceed through history and associate the different stages of the statue with particular empires. The vision intends to communicate something more general, but also more grand: God is sovereign; he is in control despite present conditions.

Not allowing ourselves to be distracted by the above debate, we notice some crucial theological principles in the dream.²⁵ We see, for instance, that the unnamed kingdoms that follow the head of gold will be inferior to Babylon. While human beings operate on the idea that we get better and stronger with time, God's vision undercuts our understanding, informing us that the opposite is true. Gold gives way to silver, which then becomes bronze, iron, and a weak mixture of clay and iron. A statue that starts out in grandeur and beauty ends in weakness. Indeed, the expression "feet of clay" has become an idiom in our language for a point of weakness in an otherwise strong person or institution.

The other important principle in this dream-vision is seen when this statue is contrasted with the object of its demise, the rock. The statue is an object made with human hands and ingenuity. The rock, however, is explicitly said not to be the result of human intention or energy. In the interpretation, Daniel identifies the rock as "God's kingdom." The rock obliterates these human kingdoms. In this way, Daniel again speaks to

God's oppressed people that the evil they now experience is not the end of the story. In spite of present appearances, God will defeat the forces that rule over them. And not only that, God's kingdom will expand and take over the world, just as the rock becomes a huge mountain. With Calvin, we affirm that "Daniel is not relating what was going to be completed in one moment; he just wants to teach that the kingdoms of the world are transient and that there is only one eternal kingdom."²⁷

The King's Response (2:46–49)

Daniel's Ability to describe and interpret his dream overwhelms the Babylonian king. He responds with worship, falling prostrate, making an offering, and burning incense. But to whom is his worship offered? In verse 46 Nebuchadnezzar bows toward Daniel and presents him with offerings and incense. One might expect Daniel to have a near heart attack and virtually grab the king and bring him to his feet, but the passage does not tell us that he objects to this treatment. Indeed, he quietly accepts the gifts and promotion mentioned in verse 48. As a matter of fact, he uses his good position to leverage his three friends to important positions as well. These new positions lead to the jealousy of native officials, which results in the conflicts in chapter 3.

No, Daniel seems quietly to accept what at least appears to be worship offered to him by Nebuchadnezzar. This behavior contrasts sharply with Paul and Barnabas in Lystra (Acts 14:8–20). After healing a lame man, the townspeople treated them as Zeus and Hermes, and the apostles reacted quickly, tearing their clothes and urgently shouting, "We too are only men!"

Appeal is often made to a speech by Alexander when he bowed before the high priest of Yahweh in Jerusalem, but when questioned stated, "It was not before him that I prostrated myself but the God of whom he has the honour to be high priest." Indeed, we must understand verse 46 in the light of verse 47, where Nebuchadnezzar praises the power behind Daniel. God is "God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries." Daniel is honored because of what his God has done, not because of what he has done. However, we must not be misled to think that Nebuchadnezzar is converted here. As a good polytheist, Nebuchadnezzar was more than willing to acknowledge the power of foreign deities. He could easily

incorporate Yahweh into his pantheon and give him the credit due him at the moment.

Nonetheless, the parallel with Alexander does not explain Daniel's passive reception of Nebuchadnezzar's worship. Perhaps Daniel did react in the way Paul did at Lystra, but the often reticent Hebrew narrative does not inform us of this.²⁹ However, it is more likely to be explained by the comment that "in the world in which the author of Daniel lived a benefactor could be treated like this without impiety, and Nebuchadnezzar is simply expressing in an extravagant way his great gratitude for the very considerable service which Daniel has done him."³⁰

Whatever reason we give, the concluding scene gives us a powerful picture that reinforces the theme of our book: The most powerful pagan in the world lies prostrate before an exiled Jew. Chills of excitement and the flames of hope will rise in the hearts of those who identify with Daniel and his God.

Bridging Contexts

THE CHAPTER OPENS with Nebuchadnezzar's uneasiness with a dream. On a surface reading, the core issue of the story seems tightly focused on the meaning of the dream. Once Daniel describes and interprets the dream, we learn that it concerns the future rise and fall of kingdoms. What could be more fascinating to a modern reader than a divine glimpse at the future? Thus, many readers fix their rapt attention on the dream and its interpretation.

However, as we mentioned in the Original Meaning section, the core concern was not the content of the dream or even its interpretation, but on Daniel's God-given ability to interpret the dream. This is not to claim that the message of the dream is unimportant, but certainly the focus is on the context between the Babylonian wise men and Daniel. Where the "magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers" of Babylon failed, Daniel succeeded. Why? The text is structured to highlight the answer to this question, and in his prayer, Daniel articulates it well (2:23):

I thank and praise you, O God of my fathers: You have given me wisdom and power, you have made known to me what we asked of you, you have made known to us the dream of the king.

Only God's wisdom, according to Daniel 2, can reveal the mysteries of life. Human wisdom falls short.

In this way, Daniel 2 contributes to a biblical theology of wisdom that begins early in the Old Testament and continues into the New. Understanding the contours of that theology not only helps us understand chapter 2, but also permits us to see its continuing relevance to Christians today. We cannot hope to do more than scratch the surface here, though even a brief survey will prove informative.

Wisdom in the Old Testament. When we think of biblical wisdom, we normally think of the book of Proverbs. If we are not careful, however, this book can be misread and mislead us into thinking that wisdom is something that human beings attain by hard work alone. We may also be deluded into thinking that human wisdom is the key to earthly success:

Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching. They will be a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck. (Prov. 1:8–9)

The first nine chapters of Proverbs exhort us to learn, remember, pay attention, listen well, and avoid the way of the evil fool. In chapters 10 and following we read many pithy proverbs about the wise path and its attendant rewards and about the way of the fool and its dire consequences. Proverbs 12:11 gives us a classic illustration:

He who works his land will have abundant food, but he who chases fantasies lacks judgment.

As we read the book of Proverbs, we can easily get the mistaken impression that wisdom involves the memorization and application of certain proverbs that make little direct reference to God or theology. These proverbs may ultimately be God's wisdom, but only in some distant way. An unfortunate

consequence of this contemporary misreading of Proverbs is that the book is often misused as the ultimate in self-help manuals, a guide to how to be healthy and successful in a chaotic world.

Such a misunderstanding of Proverbs arises because of our modern tendency to read the book in pieces rather than as a whole. It is true that many of the proverbs in chapters 10–31 seem more like common sense based on experience, rather than the type of revealed wisdom Daniel received in answer to his prayer. But once again, we must appeal to the structure of the book of Proverbs and to the effect it has on our reading of any part of it.

The first nine chapters of Proverbs are the theological grid through which we must read each individual maxim. Running throughout chapters 1–9 is a contrast between two concepts: Wisdom and Folly. These concepts are personified at important points as two women, vying for the attention of the reader, who, in its ancient setting, is assumed to be a male. This contrast, anticipated as early as the first chapter (cf. 1:20–33), comes to a dramatic climax in chapter 9. Here, Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly appeal to men who are passing by their homes and invite them in for a meal.

The imagery is clear and powerful. The reader is asked to enter into an intimate relationship with one of two women: Wisdom or Folly. Who are these women? Their homes are located on the high point of the city. Only deities have their homes on the hill in the ancient Near East. While Folly stands for the false gods that tempt God's people, so Wisdom is Yahweh himself. In other words, the proverbs of the book are not just common sense or based on experience; they are rather the result of a relationship with God. What, after all, is the origin of wisdom according to the book of Proverbs: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7).

That Proverbs was and is misread in the way we have suggested is confirmed by the presence of two other wisdom books in the Old Testament. In the first place, Job's three friends incarnate the perverse misreading of Proverbs by their mechanistic and "health-and-wealth" understanding of life. Job is in trouble; he suffers horribly. What is their proposed solution? "Get wise; you must have sinned, so get right with God."

Job is well-characterized as a wisdom debate.³¹ It is not only the three friends who believe they have wisdom, but Elihu and even Job himself.

They each believe they have something of a grasp on the problem; they each argue against the interpretation and solution of the others.

But the lesson comes at the end of the book. Once again, wisdom is not a concept to be learned; it is a relationship to be enjoyed (see "The New Testament and wisdom," where this will be fleshed out). Where is wisdom to be found? Not through human effort but, again, "the fear of the Lord—that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding" (Job 28:28). The pop quiz that God gives Job at the end has as its point that wisdom is with God and he reveals it to whom he wills.

Space does not permit a detailed treatment of the second wisdom book that serves to correct a misreading of proverbial wisdom in the Old Testament, but Ecclesiastes contributes in much the same way as Job.³² Wisdom, says the Teacher, is not the ultimate solution. Indeed, he spent much of his life striving to be wise, and his conclusion, "Meaningless! Meaningless!... Everything is meaningless" (12:8). At the end, a second voice is heard. This voice does not urge harder work, but once again a relationship (Eccl. 12:13–14):

Now all has been heard;
here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the whole duty of man.
For God will bring every deed into judgment,
including every hidden thing,
whether it is good or evil.

Our survey of key Old Testament wisdom passages confirms what we learned from the book of Daniel. Contrary to modern misunderstandings, wisdom has a divine origin, not a human one. The minor key of books like Job and Ecclesiastes also warn us that true wisdom's reward is not always in this world, though Proverbs informs us that wisdom and success sometimes accompany one another. In the case of Daniel 2, it is the latter that is the case, for the chapter closes with Nebuchadnezzar stretched out on the floor, giving honor to God's servant. When we turn to the next chapter, however, we see that this success is short-lived. Daniel and his friends did not demand human reward for their obedience (see comments on Dan. 3).

Our survey has also taught us something implicit about wisdom in Daniel 2, but which is explicit elsewhere. The divine origin of wisdom means that at its foundation wisdom is not a lesson to be learned but a relationship to be enjoyed. Daniel's wisdom, contrary to that of the learned Babylonian astrologers, did not come from books of dream interpretation; instead, it came from a conversation, a prayer, with God himself.

The New Testament and wisdom. The apostle Paul came to understand the divine origin of wisdom. When he was young, he studied hard under Gamaliel, a well-known rabbi, and he worked hard at being a good follower of God (Acts 22:3–5). He heard about those who followed Christ, and he considered them utter fools; his mission in life was to destroy the fledgling church through his intellect and even through violence.

According to his own testimony, however, God opened his eyes, so that he saw the source of true wisdom, God himself. He knew, of course, how the world counted wisdom. It was not through revelation but through vast learning. Indeed, his later reflections in 1 Corinthians 1:18–2:16 sound like a Christian reflection on Daniel 2. 1 Corinthians 1:20 could be the motto: "Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"

Paul realized, as Daniel did before him, that true wisdom is not the result of years of reading or even living life; rather, true wisdom is the result of a relationship, a relationship with the God who created and rules over the world. The apostle, chosen by God to testify to great acts of redemption, could speak more precisely than Daniel. If asked about the source of wisdom, he would reply: Jesus Christ. This is what he means at the crescendo of his great discourse on the difference between true wisdom and the wisdom of this world (1 Cor. 2:10b–16):

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught by human wisdom but in words

taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment:

"For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?"

But we have the mind of Christ.

We have the mind of Christ. We have a relationship with Jesus Christ, God's own divine Son, in whom "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). Jesus is wisdom himself (1 Cor. 1:30). For us to be wise, we must be united with him. Understanding this is crucial to our application of the message of Daniel 2 to our lives today at the turn of the second millennium A.D.

The dream itself. Before we do so, however, we must return to the occasion that led to God's powerful and public display of his wisdom—Nebuchadnezzar's dream. While we were right to deflect the type of obsessive interest in the future that focuses on the statue's meaning as the primary meaning of Daniel 2, we would be equally wrong to ignore it altogether. As readers have long noted, Daniel 2 bears many similarities to the scheme of Daniel 7. Indeed, this chapter is unique in the first half of the book with respect to the interest in the future that it shares with the second half of the book. We will, therefore, reserve discussion of some of the key aspects of the dream for that part of the book that focuses on the future as a major concern (the interested reader should consult especially the comments on ch. 7, but also 8, 10–12).

For now, we will highlight one crucial detail of the dream. The dream of the successive world empires succumbing to the power of a rock said to represent God's "kingdom that will never be destroyed" (2:44). This dream supports the overall message of the book, repeated in different ways many times: *Though circumstances appear to favor the power of ungodly human*

personalities and institutions, God will overpower them. Perhaps the most significant contribution of this vision is the note that this devastating rock was cut out of the ground "not by human hands" (2:34). The fact that God's kingdom is established apart from human efforts is an important topic as we turn to our own life situations today.

Contemporary Significance

It is possible to derive a formal difference between the kind of wisdom Daniel displays in chapter 2 and that which he shows in chapter 1. In chapter 1 Daniel's wisdom is similar to the kind of wisdom we find in the book of Proverbs: street smarts, knowing how to navigate life in the midst of its troubles and obstacles, based on experience and what works. Daniel ran into a roadblock in his desire to avoid the food of the king's table, so he thought of a better strategy to achieve his end, and it worked. In Daniel 2, the kind of wisdom he displayed is more striking from a human perspective. His insight into Nebuchadnezzar's dream constituted what scholars call mantic wisdom. Daniel did not know the contents and interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream by virtue of looking through the prism of God's Word at past experience and applying it to a present circumstance. He knew it because God told him directly in response to a prayer.

The source of true wisdom. Today Christians debate whether such wisdom as that found in Daniel 2 is available to God's followers. On the one hand, some Christians feel a strong continuity with God's people of the biblical period and ask why we shouldn't believe that God still speaks directly and specifically to people today. How can we deny the possibility that God can speak through our dreams or reveal something in a special way to us today?³³ Other Christians, and I would include myself here (though with great respect to my brothers and sisters on the other side of the issue), note a strong connection between the giving of special revelation with the great acts of God that accomplished redemption. These acts came to a conclusion with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; thus, after the completion of that divinely revealed record and the interpretation of that great climactic act, God now speaks to us through his completed revelation, the Bible, rather than in sporadic dreams or prophetic utterances.

Space does not permit an elaborate discussion of this issue,³⁴ but what if I am correct and God does not normally speak to us in the same way as he spoke to Daniel in chapter 2? Does that make this chapter irrelevant to us?

Not at all. I hope I have demonstrated in the Bridging Contexts section that, while it is possible to speak of a formal difference between the type of wisdom displayed in Daniel 1 and 2, substantially they are the same. It isn't as if the wisdom of Daniel in chapter 2 comes directly from God and the wisdom of chapter 1 is based on human experience apart from the divine. The latter wisdom, like the wisdom of Proverbs, is not based on common sense or experience of life; rather, it too has God as its ultimate and only source. Both types of wisdom, mantic and principal, derive from a relationship with God. For the Christian, we may state it in this manner: all wisdom comes from the One in whom "are hidden all the treasure of wisdom" (Col. 2:3), namely, Jesus Christ.

In light of these passages, even the wisdom displayed by non-Christians has to be understood as a gift of God, in what the theologians call "common grace." If we desire wisdom to live in a chaotic and confusing world, then the message of the Bible is to enrich our relationship with Christ.

We live in an increasingly complex and confusing world. With every new and improved technological advance, we are told that our lives will be simpler and easier. That's the hype, but when we buy our computer, log onto the Internet, or get our cellular phone, we find a whole host of new questions and obstacles facing us there. Where will we find the wisdom necessary to live in a world of growing complexity? Many think it is through intelligence, which we often confuse with wisdom. To get on in a world of technology, even to get a decent career, we think that knowledge, advanced degrees, and high IQs are the ticket to success and happiness in living.

Indeed, as a professor and a Ph.D. myself, I have a hard time discouraging a person's desire to gain knowledge about the Bible, about ourselves, or about our world. However, I will be the first to argue that there is no equation between one's intellect and happiness and success in life. The most intellectual people are often the worst in relationships and living a daily life. Even more, the smartest people don't always succeed in the job market either, including a heady profession like education. How often have we heard it. "My teacher is really smart but she does not know how to

communicate." Or, "My boss really knows his stuff, but he certainly can't relate to his employees."

In a remarkably revealing book, Daniel Goleman counters the popular idea that a high IQ indicates a person will have the world at his or her fingertips.³⁵ His concluded that "a high IQ is no guarantee of prosperity, prestige, or happiness in life." He cites a study of college graduates with varying IQs, which showed no correlation between their Intelligence Quotient and their "salary, productivity, or status" or their "happiness with friendships, family, and romantic relationships." His conclusion is that "at best, IQ contributes about 20 percent to the factors that determine life success, which leaves 80 percent to other forces."³⁶

That Goleman hit a nerve in our society was indicated that his book has enjoyed many months on the *New York Times* best-sellers list. The significance of his study for us is that he has simply stumbled across a truth stated long ago by the Bible. Biblical wisdom is more than a knowledge of facts, it is a more like a skill (a "knowing how" rather than a "knowing that") based on our relationship with Jesus Christ. Wisdom is a divinely given ability to have insight as to the best way to live life.

After his critique of IQ as the road to success, Goleman introduces the vital importance of what he calls "emotional intelligence." Again, what is striking is its uncanny similarity to biblical wisdom. Emotional intelligence goes well beyond the facts, for it "includes self-control, zeal and persistence and the ability to motivate oneself." He expands this concept later in his book when he includes in emotional intelligence "abilities such as being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustration; to control impulse and delay gratification; to regulate one's moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to empathize and to hope." 38

This is fine and good, but the question is, "How in the world can I do this? Regulate my moods? Control my impulses? Delay gratification? I would if I could!" Goleman gives practical suggestions for child rearing and depends heavily on the idea that once we see the benefits of our more reasonable behavior, we will conform. Most of us, however, cannot control ourselves in the way he suggests—on our own power.

Relationship with Christ. Goleman identifies the problem and points us in the right direction, but he does not provide the solution. Biblical wisdom

goes much further. It points to the solution: a power greater than we are and outside of ourselves. This is a relationship with Jesus Christ.

What does this mean in practical terms? It means we live life in a troubled and confusing world in relationship with Christ. We gain our wisdom in conversation with him. And how do we converse with Christ? Through prayer and reading his Word. Through prayer we enhance our relationship with him through praise, and we draw on his wisdom through sharing our problems and confusion. We then listen to his answer as he speaks to us through the Bible.

The Bible, however, must be understood as more than a list of principles to be memorized and then applied in a mechanical way. It takes a wise person to know the time and place to put into practice a biblical principle stated in Proverbs. A misapplied proverb can be a horrible thing (Prov. 26:7, 9):

Like a lame man's legs that hang limp is a proverb in the mouth of a fool....

Like a thornbush in a drunkard's hand is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.

But a proverb applied correctly is cause for great joy (15:23):

A man finds joy in giving an apt reply—and how good is a timely word!

Wisdom is a relationship that produces a mindset, a way of looking at the world. Indeed, it looks at life through the eyes of Christ. It does not stop with the memorization of biblical verses.

In Daniel 2, God used Daniel to display his own wisdom. Though Nebuchadnezzar in his spiritual blindness (or at least serious nearsightedness) bowed before Daniel, the reader knows that God is the one who deserves the praise for the miracle of interpretation. But it is not only for the act of interpretation itself, but its content as well. The dream taught that although evil human kingdoms will dominate for a season, the ultimate victory will go to God. It is his kingdom that will be established. The rock,

cut without human hands, will not only crush the statue but it will grow to mountain-like proportions.

Who is the rock? The symbolism is multifaceted, but readers of the New Testament cannot help but think of Jesus Christ as the rock who establishes God's kingdom by crushing godless nations. It is true that the tradition that identifies Jesus as the rock derives also from Psalm 118:22 (Matt. 21:42; Mark 12:10–11; Luke 20:17; 1 Peter 2:7) and Isaiah 8:14 and 28:16 (Rom. 9:33; 1 Peter 2:6, 8), but we get a clear reference to Daniel 2 in Luke 20:18. The context is the parable of the tenants (Luke 20:9–19). The parable is the story of an vineyard (often a symbol of God's kingdom)³⁹ rented to tenants, who then refuse to pay. The owner sends messengers to collect the rent, but they are beaten and chased off. Finally, the owner sends his son, but the tenants do the unspeakable and kill the son. At that point, the owner returns himself, kills the tenants, and gives the vineyard to others.

In a clear attempt to identify himself with the son and his listeners with the doomed tenants, Jesus quotes Psalm 118:22: "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone," and then immediately associates this stone with the stone of Daniel 2 "Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed" (Luke 20:18).

Daniel 3:1–30

¹KING NEBUCHADNEZZAR MADE an image of gold, ninety feet high and nine feet wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. ²He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. ³So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it.

⁴Then the herald loudly proclaimed, "This is what you are commanded to do, O peoples, nations and men of every language: ⁵As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. ⁶Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace."

⁷Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the peoples, nations and men of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

⁸At this time some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews. ⁹They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, live forever! ¹⁰You have issued a decree, O king, that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, ¹¹and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace.

¹²But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who pay no attention to you, O king. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up."

13Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, ¹⁴and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? ¹⁵Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"

¹⁶Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. ¹⁸But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

¹⁹Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual ²⁰and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. ²¹So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the

blazing furnace. ²²The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, ²³and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.

²⁴Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?"

They replied, "Certainly, O king."

²⁵He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods."

²⁶Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!"

So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, ²⁷and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.

²⁸Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. ²⁹Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way."

³⁰Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

Original Meaning

Daniel 3 contains a single story with a clear beginning, middle, and end. In other words, though it fits nicely into the broader context, it has its own plot, which generates tension but moves toward resolution.

As with the first two chapters, Daniel 3 is set during the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. This is the first chapter, however, that does not give a more precise chronological marker. We do not know how much time has elapsed since the previous episode, but we must imagine a gap of not a few years to account for Nebuchadnezzar's shift from honoring the God of Daniel as he did at the end of chapter 2 to throwing that God's devotees into a burning furnace.¹

The plot tension is introduced when Nebuchadnezzar made a huge golden statue and then insisted that everyone present bow down and worship it. Later we will explore the possible significance behind this command, but here we simply note that people of the time would by and large have had little difficulty with this request. After all, most people in the ancient Near East were polytheists, used to acknowledging many deities. They could easily assimilate this statue into their religious scheme, especially under the duress of capital punishment. But this was not true of the Judeans in exile. Their belief in one God prohibited participation in this ritual, and their adversaries knew it.

The text indicates that the three friends of Daniel could have gotten away with their nonconformance if it were not for certain enemies who turned them in (vv. 9–12). These informers are identified as "some astrologers" (v. 8) and probably were professional colleagues who hated to see these gifted foreigners rise so quickly and so high in the Babylonian government. They thought they had the perfect plan to do away with them.

Thus, from a literary point of view, this account is a narrative of "court conflict." This label rightly indicates that here the Judeans encounter the animosity of their enemies in a way that they have not yet experienced. This account may be the first record of specifically religious persecution, but unfortunately not the last.³

In chapter 2, God made known his great wisdom. Here, he will reveal his power. The story in this way will again support the overarching theme of the book of Daniel: *In spite of present appearances, God is in control.* The

specific focus of this chapter is that God's power transcends even death. This stirring story intends to bolster the courage of God's people as they face what seems to be overwhelming odds.

The structure of the chapter is as follows: (1) Nebuchadnezzar's image of gold (3:1–7); the accusation against the three friends (3:8–12); the confrontation with Nebuchadnezzar (3:13–18); the miraculous deliverance (3:19–27); Nebuchadnezzar worships God (3:28–30). Catholic editions of Daniel include two additions to this chapter: a short prayer of Azariah, followed by a song sung by the three young men.⁴ The prayer is one of confession and acknowledgment of God's justice, much like Daniel 9 in tone. The song (preceded by a short prose description of the furnace ordeal) is a hymn extolling God.

Nebuchadnezzar's Image of Gold (3:1–7)

THE EPISODE BEGINS with the simple statement that Nebuchadnezzar built a golden image on the plain of Dura.⁵ The author of Daniel does not inform us whether the image was a god or the king himself? In one sense, this distinction does not matter. Whether deity or the divinized king, the command was to worship and bow down to this statue, to treat it or what it represented as the most important power in the universe. Such a command was impossible for a faithful follower of the true God to obey, and that is the point of the text.

All we learn about the statue is its dimensions and the material out of which it was made. Like many ancient idols it was made from a precious metal, in this case gold. Analogies with other idols known from this time period suggest that the statue was gold-plated and not solid gold. The gold of this statue links the story with Nebuchadnezzar's recently described dream in which he was the head of gold. Perhaps this is a clue that the statue was indeed of the king, though rarely did Mesopotamian kings present themselves as gods, and we have no other evidence that Nebuchadnezzar broke this tradition.

The size of the image is startling: "ninety feet high and nine feet wide." Commentators have grappled with what Young has called the "grotesque" shape of this statue, suggesting solutions like a large dais included in the dimensions or pointing to the long, thin (though much smaller) statues of deities and worshipers recovered through archaeology. Collins provides the

most exhaustive list of large statues known in the ancient world, most notably mentioning the statue of Bel in Babylon as reported by Herodotus (who calls it Bel Zeus), though this statue was only eighteen feet high. Other scholars mention the colossus of Rhodes, closer in height to Nebuchadnezzar's statue and built in the following Persian period. 10

Nebuchadnezzar not only built the statue; he demanded a public demonstration of adoration. For this purpose, he issued a call for "the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials" to attend its dedication. With this rather imposing list of officials, we encounter a lengthy list that is repeated a number of times in the chapter. These lists appear ponderous to us, but their literary effect is to heighten the tension and the feeling of danger toward the three friends, who will soon be singled out of the group. As Fewell states it, "through repetition, the narrator creates a scenario in which conformity is normative, disobedience is unthinkable." The various categories of people in the list are political officials from around the empire, which may signal that this was Nebuchadnezzar's attempt to solidify control over the diverse elements of his vast empire.

We encounter a second lengthy list as well, which is also repeated (cf. vv. 5, 7, 10, 15: "the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music"). This is a list of musical instruments at whose sound everyone was to show their respects to the statue. This list emphasizes the "pomp" surrounding the ceremony and heightens the tension, focusing on the moment of obedience or disobedience.

As reported in these first seven verses, everything seems to be proceeding according to the specifications of the king. The order was given through the musical prelude, and "all the peoples, nations and men of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up" (v. 7). Or so he thought....

The Accusation Against the Three Friends (3:8–12)

INDEED, WHEN VERSE 7 reports that everyone worshiped the image, it is probably giving Nebuchadnezzar's perspective. As his eyes scanned the plain of Dura, he apparently saw only the large crowd obeying his command to prostrate themselves before his golden statue. His contentment was shattered, however, by the report he received from a contingent of

astrologers, who accused "some Jews" (v. 12) of disobedience to the king's direct command in spite of the threatened penalty of a horrible death.

We should note that this is an accusation by *some* astrologers against *some* Jews. It is not a class action against a whole people. Indeed, many aspects of this story leave us with various questions. What about the other Jewish people? Were any others present? Did they conform? And, most provocatively, where was Daniel?

We should avoid making dogmatic pronouncements when the text is silent. Wood goes over the edge when he asserts, for instance, that the three friends stood completely alone and every other Jewish person gave in.¹³ Critical scholars take the silence of the text too far in a different direction when they use Daniel's absence to speak of a separate tradition that knew of the three friends but not of Daniel, and a later redaction that brought the two strands together in a kind of slipshod manner.¹⁴

Perhaps it is correct to treat Daniel 2:49 ("Moreover, at Daniel's request the king appointed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego administrators over the province of Babylon, while Daniel himself remained at the royal court") as an implicit answer to the question of Daniel's absence. It certainly explains why Daniel and the three friends were not automatically together, but we cannot, again, be dogmatic.

The text is a bit more suggestive, though once again not explicit, about the motivation of the accusing astrologers. The hint comes when they describe the three Jews as those "whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon" (v. 12). These men appear to be motivated out of professional jealousy. They beat them out for best honors in their school (ch. 1), and now they are rapidly rising in the ranks of the government—and they are foreigners to boot!

Close attention to the words of the astrologers reveal their strategy as they stir the king to action against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. In a phrase, they appeal to his sense of vanity. The disobedience of the three Jews is a personal affront. After all, he was the one who issued the decree and warned of the penalty. These rebels "pay no attention to *you*, O king. They neither serve *your* gods nor worship the image of gold *you* have set up" (v. 12, italics added). With this approach, Nebuchadnezzar's reaction is predictable.

The Confrontation With Nebuchadnezzar (3:13–18)

A CASE COULD be made as early as chapter 2 that Nebuchadnezzar betrays a sense of insecurity. This sounds surprising for the most powerful human being on the face of the earth, but with power and wealth come those who want to take it away for themselves, even if it means murder. Nebuchadnezzar's insecurity is apparent in his treatment of the wisdom teachers in chapter 2 as well as in his happiness after learning that he was the head of gold.

The premise of this chapter is the enforced worship of Nebuchadnezzar's golden statue, which, whether idol or royal statue, is a way of compelling a display of loyalty. The report of disloyalty among the three friends causes an explosion of anger on his part. He immediately has them brought into his presence for a personal loyalty test.

The tension reaches fever pitch when Nebuchadnezzar orders a personal ceremony for the three, instructing the band to strike up the introit, at the end of which they are to worship the image. He climaxes his exhortation with a statement that gets at the heart of the theological teaching of the chapter: "What god will be able to rescue you from my hand" (v. 15). In chapter 2, we saw the astrologers themselves unknowingly throwing down the challenge to the Lord God as they asserted that no god had the requisite wisdom to answer the king's question (2:11). Here the king asserts his own power above all gods, and we can imagine the God of Psalm 2 raising his eyebrows and emitting a slight chuckle.

The three friends are not ready to laugh, but they stand their ground in a rather startling way. Their answer seems arrogant at first hearing: "We do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter" (v. 16). They go on to explain in a way that strikes us as odd, but when properly understood, becomes an example of tremendous courage in the context of intense religious persecution (vv. 17–18): "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

This is no easy answer to the king's anger. They begin by acknowledging God's ability to save them, but then they envision the possibility that God may choose not to do so.¹⁵ In other words, they answer Nebuchadnezzar in

light of the possibility that they will be burned to ashes in the blazing furnace. Whichever is the case, they say, they will not worship the golden image.

In its original setting, this answer heightens the literary tension of the story (at least on first hearing). Even the faithful follower of God does not know what will happen to the three friends. Will they live or die? God may rescue them or they may die, martyrs to the cause of faith. But even those original hearers of the story who know the outcome can find great significance in this answer. Yes, the three friends survive, but they also know that some of their people have died at the hands of the persecutors. Was this because God was unable to deliver at those times? Was it because these others did not have the requisite faith? No, it was that God, in his unfathomable wisdom, did not chose to save them. No matter what the result, deliverance or death, they will not give into the evil powers of the world. They will stay faithful to God. This, of course, will have tremendous implications for how we think about suffering today (see below).

The Miraculous Deliverance (3:19–27)

THE THREE FRIENDS' speech, courageous in our ears, exasperates the king. He grows even more furious. Interestingly, the Aramaic text, which the NIV idiomatically translates as "his attitude toward them changed," may more literally be translated, "the image [selem] of his face changed." The one who in his pride has created an image with the purpose of assuring uniform loyalty finds his own image provoked beyond his control. He orders the furnace, apparently burning in the background of the scene, to be superheated, reflecting perhaps the heat of his own anger. Then he orders his soldiers to throw the three Jews in.

Our picture of this furnace is supplied by the description of the text rather than any firm archaeological knowledge. For the narrative to make sense, the furnace must be large. Some scholars have suggested that this is a furnace near the plain of Dura that was used to make the great golden image in the first place. Apparently the three are thrown in from an opening at the top, but Nebuchadnezzar's ability to look into the furnace indicates that perhaps there was a window or opening at the side as well.

In any case, the soldiers obediently cast Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into the fire. The fire is so hot that it kills the soldiers. Loyalty to

a godless and foolish king brings death, not the life one would expect. But what about those who refuse obedience when it comes to a choice between faithfulness to Nebuchadnezzar and to God himself? Is there "a god" who can rescue them from the hands of such a powerful ruler?

Nebuchadnezzar himself gives us the answer: "I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods" (v. 25). The king quickly gets the message and orders the three out, and then Nebuchadnezzar and all the others, including the accusers, witness the extent of the miracle of deliverance. Verse 21 narrated the clothing of the three when they were thrown in. They were fully dressed in "robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes," but when they emerged, "the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them" (v. 27). It was as if they were not even in the fire.

In this way, God is showing Nebuchadnezzar who is in charge. Even if the image that precipitated the crisis is not of Nebuchadnezzar himself, he has certainly put himself in place of God, insisting that he is the ultimate power of the universe, from whose rage no deity could hope to save a follower. By contrast, it is only the true God who can proclaim that "no one can deliver out of my hand" (Deut. 32:39). And this great God was a proven deliverer. After all, when he rescued his people from Egypt centuries before, Moses told the Israelites that it was God who "brought you out of the iron-smelting furnace, out of Egypt, to be the people of his inheritance, as you now are" (4:20).

Nebuchadnezzar Worships God (3:28-30)

THAT GOD RESCUED the three Jews no one is in doubt, but who was that "fourth [who] looks like a son of the gods" (v. 25)? As in chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar is moved from anger to praise toward God and his followers. In his concluding speech in the present chapter, he again mentions the mysterious fourth person. When he first saw the figure, he labeled him a "son of the gods"; now he calls him God's "angel" (v. 28). His dual description has launched a debate that continues to the present day, which will take us into the next two sections as well as into a consideration whether our later perspective might throw even more light on the issue. But at this stage we must remember that the narrative places these two

descriptions in the mouth of Nebuchadnezzar, who is not an Israelite theologian. Relying on his words, we are thrown into a quandary: Was this God himself as "a son of the gods" might lead us to believe, 17 or an angel?

In one sense, it does not make any difference. Even if the fourth figure was an angel, it was *God's* angel; God is still the redeemer. Even Nebuchadnezzar recognizes this. He further acknowledges that the three have been right to obey this God rather than a king like him.

The king then issues a command that, while not instituting worship of the true God, will not allow anyone in his kingdom to show such a powerful deity any disrespect. Furthermore, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego get a further promotion, thus completely thwarting the intentions of their accusers.

Bridging Contexts

THE PRECIPITATING CAUSE of the action in Daniel 3 is Nebuchadnezzar's construction of a huge statue with the attendant insistence that all the leaders, indeed the "peoples, nations and men of every language" (v. 4), bow down in worship to this statue.

Near Eastern idolatry. As we have noted, it is impossible to be dogmatic concerning the identity of the statue. Is it the king himself or, as is more likely, one of the gods? And, if the latter, which one? There are two reasons to tip the scale slightly in favor of seeing the statue as that of a deity. (1) It was rare for Mesopotamian kings to be divinized, and there is no evidence that Nebuchadnezzar ever moved in this direction.

(2) If the king were divine, why would he need to build a statue-idol to receive worship when he himself was physically present?¹⁸ An idol of a god in Mesopotamian religious conception was a way in which to make the normally invisible god present. The gods were active in the world, often as personified forces of nature, but they were not visible. An idol made a god visible. The idol was not the god, but since it represented the god, it was imbued with the god's aura. A sophisticated Mesopotamian theologian would have denied an equation between the physical idol and his god; but in another sense, the idol, being the physical manifestation of the god, was treated as if it were the god. We know about elaborate ceremonies of bathing and feeding statues that showed the awe with which these physical objects were approached.¹⁹ While the theologian and other sophisticated

thinkers in the society approached the idol as a symbol of the god, I suspect that many people were more crass in their identification of god and idol.²⁰

Regardless of whether the idol was royal or divine, the statue was understood to represent a god or even in the minds of some identified with a god. It was a deity represented by a statue constructed from precious materials and intended to represent a deity of some sort. It was therefore the appropriate object of adoration. The three friends knew exactly what the statue stood for, and they also understood that they could not be faithful to the true God and bow the knee to the statue. They also realized that the cost was heavy indeed, namely, their lives.

They understood their God's will concerning their participation in the ritual on the plain of Dura, because God had expressed that will through the Ten Commandments centuries before and had laid the foundation with the first two commandments (Ex. 20:3–6):

You shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

By not worshiping this deity, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego became role models for God's people when faced with the seduction or the threat of the worship of deities constructed by human minds and human hands.

This occasion, of course, was not the first time where Israel felt the seduction of idol worship. Indeed, God's people during the Old Testament period lived constantly in the dangerous world of idols. Their danger was in their seductive power. All the nations around Israel worshiped them, nations more powerful and successful (in a worldly sense) than they were. Indeed, these are the nations that overpowered them. The temptation would be strong to worship the gods of their oppressors for one's own advancement

and because of the apparent superiority of their culture and their military power. Daniel 3 itself illustrates how, at least in this case, the worship of idols would advance one's career, while refusing to worship this idol could result in death. Many Jewish exiles may have been tempted to worship idols because they would understand Babylon's political superiority as a reflex of the superior power of their gods.

As we read the story of Israel in the Old Testament, we observe that the people and the leaders did not always successfully resist the temptation to worship those shiny, impressive-looking statues. It is for this reason that the prophets inveigh so heavily against them. Indeed, Isaiah is at his sarcastic and rhetorical best when he ridicules the idols of the surrounding nations. He satirizes idol worship by reducing it to a fetish (Isa. 44:12–20):²¹

The blacksmith takes a tool and works with it in the coals: he shapes an idol with hammers, he forges it with the might of his arm. He gets hungry and loses his strength; he drinks no water and grows faint. The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker; he roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses. He shapes it in the form of man, of man in all his glory, that it may dwell in a shrine. He cut down cedars, or perhaps took a cypress or oak. He let it grow among the trees of the forest, or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow. It is man's fuel for burning; some of it he takes and warms himself. he kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it. Half of the wood he burns in the fire: over it he prepares his meal,

he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, "Ah! I am warm; I see the fire." From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, "Save me; you are my god." They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand. No one stops to think, no one has the knowledge or understanding to say, "Half of it I used for fuel: I even baked bread over its coals. I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?" He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart misleads him: he cannot save himself, or say, "Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?"

Isaiah shows in most graphic and even darkly humorous terms that the worship of an idol (in the case of Dan. 3, the statue in the plain of Dura) was a confusion of the creation with the Creator. In idol worship, a person takes a bit of created matter and says, "You are the most important thing to me in the world. You have all the power and the wisdom!"

Now, it is true that a sophisticated ancient Near Eastern theologian (as opposed to the general populace) would likely have responded to Isaiah, "Don't be ridiculous. We don't worship that wood and metal statue! That object is simply a representation of the deity, who is not restricted to the statue but is a power above human power." But even so, what do the gods of the ancient Near East themselves represent? Who are Marduk and Ishtar, or Baal and Astarte? They are personifications of bits of creation as well. Marduk, the leading god of the neo-Babylonian empire of Nebuchadnezzar, and Baal, his counterpart in Canaan, were the power of fertility, the storm, the dew. Ishtar, also from Mesopotamia, and Astarte, her counterpart in Canaan, personified sexual potency and the violence of war.

In other words, not only the statues but the deities that they represented are bits of creation raised to the level of the Creator. We can hear Paul's later words ringing in our ears (Rom. 1:21–22):

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

We can see the seriousness of the challenge to the faith of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They are being told to demote their God, the one who created them, by not giving him their exclusive worship. They are also to worship a statue of a god they know does not exist. They cannot simply rationalize their actions, because the act of bowing down and worship indicates that they affirm the statue as equal to their God. By accepting this statue into the category of deity, they will inevitably reduce the ultimacy, authority, and jurisdiction of the true God and demote him in such a way that will make him out to be no more than one of the deities of the polytheistic world. Ultimately, the dilution or diminishment of deity is a denunciation of deity.²²

As Christians in the West at the end of the twentieth century, we are not confronted with the same threat as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—or are we? Certainly no one would build a statue and insist that we all bow down before it. But the threat of idolatry is much more subtle and therefore threatening to us today. To understand this, I find a concept of Paul Tillich, a German-American theologian of the mid-twentieth century, helpful, namely, that of "Ultimate Concern." Tillich pointed out that a person's god is the thing or person that one is most concerned about, thinks the most about, or affects one's life the most.

If Tillich's language is a tad abstract for some, let me introduce a phrase made famous by Bill Bright and Campus Crusade. He used a catchy metaphor to get people to think about what is acting as a god in their lives by inquiring, "Who is on the throne of your life?" If it is not the true God of

the Bible, he suggests, then it is an idol. In the Contemporary Significance section we will explore what permutations idolatry takes in our time.

Faithful in the face of death. But harking back to our comments on Daniel 3, we want to observe how the three friends react to Nebuchadnezzar's insistence that they worship the idol. In many ways, the problem is similar to the one encountered in chapter 1 How are God's faithful people to act in a faithless world?

In our present chapter, the dangers are heightened at least on the surface. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are compelled to conform to Nebuchadnezzar's aberrant religious ceremony in a public setting under the threat of death. We are first struck again by the lack of stridency exhibited by the faithful Jewish youths. Unlike the young third-century A.D. theologian Origen, who wanted to throw himself in front of the emperor's chariot and proclaim Christ, they simply quietly decide not to participate. Apparently, the king does not even notice them; it takes a group of informants who are out to get the three to bring it to the king's attention. But when they are then brought in for private interrogation, they show that their quiet rebellion earlier does not hide a heart of cowardice. They calmly and boldly proclaim their faith without a moment's hesitation.

Their courage is remarkable. They do not seek death, but neither do they shirk it. They refuse to betray their God even in the light of the real possibility that they may die for their stand.

Indeed, we must be very careful not to let the optimistic outcome of the story cloud our vision. The friends have no confidence that they will survive the ordeal ("even if he does not [save us], we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" [v. 18]). They know that that type of confidence is nothing but the most irksome of presumptions.

Their response preserves the story from devolving into a false promise that God will save every faithful person from suffering and death. Such a story would betray the faithful martyrs who have stood faithful but suffered death. Jesus himself honored God's followers who died during the Old Testament time when he spoke of "all the righteous blood that has been shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah" (Matt. 23:35). The story of church history from

its beginnings under the Roman empire to the present has countless stories of faithful witnesses who have stood firm to the end.

The three friends' courage is all the more amazing when we reflect on what they may have thought concerning life after death. In a word, it is not at all clear that they had a definite idea of a judgment or reward after death, and it is extremely unlikely that, even if they did know of the resurrection of the dead, that they had an extensive picture of the blessings of heaven. They certainly do not appeal to such a hope here, and there is little explicit teaching about the resurrection of the dead, eternal life, or heaven in previous Scripture. The teaching is there implicitly, and later in the book of Daniel it becomes explicit (Dan. 12:1–3), but something other than future bliss motivates the three friends and invests their potential death with meaning.

Towner at least partially captures their motivation when he states that "their deaths subverted the power of the authorities to crush integrity and to silence truth."²⁴ In this regard, he compares the meaningfulness of the martyr's death to the meaninglessness of the death of the guards, who obediently escorted the three friends to the mouth of the fiery furnace.

But a more specific answer to the question is forthcoming when we consider the actual contents of the three friends' "truth" and "integrity." They stand firm because they trust their God—no matter what, and no matter what includes death. Victor Frankl, a survivor of German death camps and no stranger to courage in the face of the danger of death himself, quotes Nietzsche's aphorism that applies to the three friends as well as to himself, "He who has a *why* to live can bear with almost any *how*." But the three friends take it far beyond Nietzsche. That philosopher is well known for his statement, "That which does not kill me, makes me stronger." The three friends bear witness to the fact that even death does not defeat them.

Contemporary Significance

MODERN IDOLATRY. AT first it is difficult for us as Christians living at the turn of the millennium to identify with the challenge facing the Jewish people on the plain of Dura. But we have suggested that the issue transcends the worship of a particular statue and concerns instead the constant threat to dilute the worship of the true God by elevating anything

or anyone else to a comparable place of importance in our life. As John Calvin has provocatively charged, the human mind is a "factory of idols." We are constantly, even as Christians, in a struggle with this temptation.

The temptation can come from a variety of sources, not all of which seem so bad on the surface of it. Our addictions can make pleasure an idol, so that all our efforts and thoughts are directed toward where we will get our next high, whether through alcohol, drugs, sex, or some other cheap thrill. We might seek power in order to control our world or simply to have the resources of revenge toward those who have hurt us in some way. All our efforts and strength thus become directed toward amassing power and influence in society, our family, or even the church. We may make relationships, or one particular relationship, an idol. We may be gearing our life and decisions not around what we understand to be God's will, but rather the will of a spouse, a child, or a friend. Seeking knowledge or degrees, writing books, or delivering impressive sermons, these too may become idols.

The list is vast, which is why the danger is so real. The seduction is subtle, which is why we can slip so easily into idol worship.²⁶ But though subtle and varied, I suggest that idolatry, whether of Nebuchadnezzar's sort or the kind we discover in our own hearts, ultimately has one object. When the masks are ripped away, behind every idol is the *self*. Frederick Nietzsche, the late nineteenth-century philosopher whose thought has such a huge influence on contemporary postmodern culture, saw this, and in his brutal and honest atheism, advocated the killing of God and the construction of a new idol, the human self. Hear him as he preaches his new doctrine:

Whatever in me has feeling, suffers and is in prison; but my will always comes to me as my liberator and joy-bringer. Willing liberates: that is the true teaching of will and liberty—thus Zarathustra teaches it. Willing no more and esteeming no more and creating no more —oh, that this great weariness might always remain far from me! In knowledge too I feel only my will's joy in begetting and becoming; and if there is innocence in my knowledge, it is because the will to beget is in it. Away

from God and gods this will has lured me; what could one create if gods existed?

But my fervent will to create impels me ever again toward man; thus is the hammer impelled toward the stone. O men, in the stone there sleeps an image, the image of my images. Alas, that it must sleep in the hardest, the ugliest stone! Now my hammer rages cruelly against its prison. Pieces of rock rain from the stone: what is that to me? I want to perfect it; for a shadow came to me—the stillest and lightest of all things once came to me. The beauty of the overman came to me as a shadow. O my brothers, what are the gods to me now?

Thus spoke Zarathustra.²⁷

God is dead; the self must replace it. In a sense, this might seem to be the opposite of Daniel 3, but it is not. It is not so much a ridding the world of God, but a replacing of God by another god—the self. Nietzsche attempted to kill God because he could not tolerate any but himself in that position: "But let me reveal my heart to you entirely, my friends: if there were gods, how could I endure not to be a god! Hence there are no gods."²⁸

Here is the heart of modern postmodern society: In the absence of the gods we may and must create our own meaning. No longer does Christ provide meaning. No longer do we feel the existential nausea of no meaning. Now we feel the will to power and the joy in constructing our own meaning in the absence of the gods. All substitutes for God are ultimately this idol—the idol of self. And as the end of the twentieth century is in the process of discovering, this idol does not lead to life, but to death—cultural and individual.

As Christians, we may not bow to this idol in any of its manifestations. Our only worship is to be directed to the one and only true and full image of God, Jesus Christ, the one whom Paul called "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15).²⁹ Ultimately, then, the second commandment, which was the heart of the three friends' resistance to the idolatry of Nebuchadnezzar, when read in the context of the canon as a whole, draws us to Jesus Christ,

Word of God and Image of God. It is to this image alone that our worship is properly directed.

Resistance to the point of death. Daniel 3 teaches us that we must not only resist idolatry, but we must be prepared to resist it to the point of death. American Christians, in spite of all their complaints about the infringements on their religion, are rarely, if ever, confronted with that kind of decision. This is not true of Christians in many other parts of the twentieth-century world, where their faith and witness can lead to a prison term or a death penalty. Such Christian witness indicates to us that the courage of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego lives on.

But, of course, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are not the only biblical role models for faithful resistance to powerful and oppressive human governments. We can think of Acts 24–26, when Paul bore witness before Felix and Agrippa, or 5:29, when Peter proclaimed before the high priest, "We must obey God rather than men!" They knew the force of Jesus' warning, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28).³⁰

Where does the Christian, starting with Peter and the apostles until today, find the moral and religious strength to make such a courageous stand? From Jesus Christ. Jesus himself was put on trial for his religious claim that he was the Messiah. Facing death himself, he refused to capitulate, dying on the cross (cf. Matt. 27:11–14).

But was Jesus at the heart of the hope of the three friends as they faced death in the furnace? It is difficult to say how specifically their hope focused on the coming Savior, the Messiah. They trusted in the saving power of God, but it is provocative to reflect on the way God chose to deliver the three from the fire. Calvin pointed out that if God wanted, he could have extinguished the flames of the fire in order to save the three men. He saved them *in* the fire, not *from* the fire.³¹ They were in the very jaws of death. Moreover, he could have saved them without further fanfare, simply having them walk out of the fire unscathed, but instead he chose to save them by the presence of a "fourth [who] looks like a son of the gods" (v. 25).

Was this "fourth" being Jesus, as many interpreters from the earliest Christian times have suggested? It is impossible to be dogmatic unless one insists that every incarnate appearance of God must be the second person of the Trinity. It is safer to say that what we have here is a reflection of Immanuel, "God with us." God dwelt with the three friends in the midst of the flames to preserve them from harm. In this sense, the Christian cannot help but see a prefigurement of Jesus Christ, who came to earth to dwell in a chaotic world and who even experienced death, not so that we might escape the experience of death but that we might have victory over it.

While this discussion might be an appropriate place to reflect further on the Christian hope of resurrection, we will reserve our comments until Daniel 12, which takes us even further in the book's theology of death.

Daniel 4:1-37

¹KING NEBUCHADNEZZAR, To the peoples, nations and men of every language, who live in all the world:

May you prosper greatly!

²It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me.

 ³How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders!
 His kingdom is an eternal kingdom; his dominion endures from generation to generation.

⁴I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at home in my palace, contented and prosperous. ⁵I had a dream that made me afraid. As I was lying in my bed, the images and visions that passed through my mind terrified me. ⁶So I commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be brought before me to interpret the dream for me. ⁷When the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners came, I told them the dream, but they could not interpret it for me. ⁸Finally, Daniel came into my presence and I told him the dream. (He is called Belteshazzar, after the name of my god, and the spirit of the holy gods is in him.)

⁹I said, "Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you, and no mystery is too difficult for you. Here is my dream; interpret it for me. ¹⁰These are the visions I saw while lying in my bed: I looked, and there before me stood a tree in the middle of the land. Its height was enormous. ¹¹The tree grew large and strong and its top touched the sky; it was visible to

the ends of the earth. ¹²Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it the beasts of the field found shelter, and the birds of the air lived in its branches; from it every creature was fed.

¹³"In the visions I saw while lying in my bed, I looked, and there before me was a messenger, a holy one, coming down from heaven. ¹⁴He called in a loud voice: 'Cut down the tree and trim off its branches; strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the animals flee from under it and the birds from its branches. ¹⁵But let the stump and its roots, bound with iron and bronze, remain in the ground, in the grass of the field.

"Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven, and let him live with the animals among the plants of the earth. ¹⁶Let his mind be changed from that of a man and let him be given the mind of an animal, till seven times pass by for him.

17"The decision is announced by messengers, the holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men.'

¹⁸"This is the dream that I, King Nebuchadnezzar, had. Now, Belteshazzar, tell me what it means, for none of the wise men in my kingdom can interpret it for me. But you can, because the spirit of the holy gods is in you."

¹⁹Then Daniel (also called Belteshazzar) was greatly perplexed for a time, and his thoughts terrified him. So the king said, "Belteshazzar, do not let the dream or its meaning alarm you."

Belteshazzar answered, "My lord, if only the dream applied to your enemies and its meaning to your adversaries! ²⁰The tree you saw, which grew

large and strong, with its top touching the sky, visible to the whole earth, ²¹with beautiful leaves and abundant fruit, providing food for all, giving shelter to the beasts of the field, and having nesting places in its branches for the birds of the air—²²you, O king, are that tree! You have become great and strong; your greatness has grown until it reaches the sky, and your dominion extends to distant parts of the earth.

²³"You, O king, saw a messenger, a holy one, coming down from heaven and saying, 'Cut down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump, bound with iron and bronze, in the grass of the field, while its roots remain in the ground. Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven; let him live like the wild animals, until seven times pass by for him.'

²⁴"This is the interpretation, O king, and this is the decree the Most High has issued against my lord the king: ²⁵You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes. ²⁶The command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules. ²⁷Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue."

²⁸All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar.
²⁹Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, ³⁰he said, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal

residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?"

³¹The words were still on his lips when a voice came from heaven, "This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. ³²You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes."

³³Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird.

³⁴At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever.

His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation.

35All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing.

He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth.

No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?"

³⁶At the same time that my sanity was restored, my honor and splendor were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom. My advisers and nobles sought me out, and I was restored to my throne and became

even greater than before. ³⁷Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.

Original Meaning

As IN CHAPTER 2, a dream forms the center of the action in chapter 4. King Nebuchadnezzar is again the recipient of a dream he cannot interpret, and, for a second time, he calls on the services of Daniel. However, in the present account Nebuchadnezzar makes no threats, but summons Daniel immediately after the failure of his (apparently) native corps of wise men. Daniel again succeeds where the Babylonian diviners fail, proving indeed that the "spirit of the holy gods" (v. 18) lives in him. However, this story does not focus or emphasize Daniel's divinely given skills as much as deals with the issue of overwhelming human pride.

As we will see in our survey of the chapter's contents, the dream properly warns Nebuchadnezzar of the dangers of his pride. This danger is extreme for Nebuchadnezzar, of course, because he is, after all, the king of Babylon, the most powerful political entity in the known world. He controls the life and death of countless human beings. He enjoys great wealth, prestige, and power. The dream and its consequences are a reminder that whatever he enjoys is at the pleasure of the true God, who, as the chapter is at pains to demonstrate, "is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes" (v. 25). Through the dream and its interpretation, he calls on Nebuchadnezzar to remember his subservience to a higher power, and through Nebuchadnezzar, the chapter reminds other powerful men and women of the same important truth. "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18).

The chapter has a unique literary structure, indeed so unique that it has resulted in a discrepancy in the tradition of dividing the book into chapters. The English division is in keeping with the contours of the story and begins in verse 1 of chapter 4 in the English, however, is 3:31 in the Aramaic.³ Apparently it was thought more typical to end rather than begin a story with a doxology.⁴

We should also mention the discussion about the role of Nebuchadnezzar in this chapter. In brief, the issue surrounds the fact that the story reports a period of seven years where he was unfit for royal duties, an event not mentioned in the extrabiblical texts. It is probably unwise to make much out of the silence of the extrabiblical texts, since the king's reign is not exhaustively documented and it is not the type of thing that Nebuchadnezzar may have wanted preserved for perpetuity in his royal inscriptions.

Nonetheless, attention has been drawn to a text discovered at Qumran called the Prayer of Nabonidus (4QPrNab), which some scholars have felt is the solution to the historical-literary conundrum.⁵ The Prayer of Nabonidus is the story of an affliction of Nabonidus, the last king of Babylon and the father of Belshazzar (see Dan. 5 for more on them). In this fragmentary text Nabonidus was said to fall ill for seven years, at the end of which he was cured through the intervention of an unnamed Jewish diviner. Another extrabiblical text has also sometimes been claimed to be a "source" for Daniel 4—a text now preserved only in the writings of the church historian Eusebius.⁶ It is a speech that Nebuchadnezzar gives on the roof of his palace, where he prophesies the coming of the one who will destroy Babylon (a pejorative reference to Cyrus) and wishes that that person might rather become like a beast in the field.

The surface similarities of the text, however, are overwhelmed by the differences, and in both cases it seems more reasonable to believe, if we follow a sixth-century B.C. dating of Daniel, that they were written not before but in the light of the story of Daniel 4.

This chapter has the form of a letter or written decree of Nebuchadnezzar himself. It is written predominantly in the first person, though verses 19–33 revert to the third person. The story is a tale of court contest in a subdued way, since it quietly shows Daniel succeeding where the Babylonian diviners fail. The structure is as follows—and we should especially note that Nebuchadnezzar's praise brackets the story, coming at the beginning and end of the account: (1) Nebuchadnezzar's decree to praise the Lord (4:1–3); (2) the dream report and the search for an interpreter (4:4–18); (3) the dream interpretation (4:19–27); (4) the fulfillment of the dream (4:28–33); (5) healing and concluding doxology (4:34–37).

Nebuchadnezzar's Decree to Praise the Lord (4:1–3)

THE LAST TWO chapters concluded with Nebuchadnezzar's praise of the Lord, but Daniel 4 departs from the pattern and begins (as well as ends) with Nebuchadnezzar's praise. One of the effects of this structure is to remove suspense concerning the nature of the outcome, but it does raise the reader's interest in discovering what leads to Nebuchadnezzar's joyful outburst. Another effect of the preface to the story, as Dana Fewell points out, is that "as an official proclamation, the piece has an air of reality, an atmosphere of authority."

The outburst is more than spontaneous; it has the form of an official proclamation directed throughout the world. As a matter of fact, Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom stretched from what is today Egypt to western Iran and from modern Syria into Saudi Arabia, encompassing many different cultures and language groups.

The content of his praise is somewhat general, but it highlights God's sovereignty and the wonderful nature of his interaction with the world. The following story is the specification of the events behind the general praise.⁸

The Dream Report and the Search for an Interpreter (4:4–18)

NEBUCHADNEZZAR NOW BEARS witness to the great and supernatural experience that he underwent. He speaks in the first person, employing a form similar to neo-Babylonian royal inscriptions. He begins by stating his prosperity and contentment. The chapter is not dated, but apparently comes at a time when the Babylonian kingdom experiences stability and success.

A dream, however, intrudes into the king's peaceful mind, tormenting him with doubt and fear. His first impulse is to call his professional wise men into his presence. Unlike his earlier dream he tells them the present dream's content, but they are still unable to offer a suitable interpretation. Their failure is a bit mystifying because Daniel's later interpretation is not all that surprising. Nonetheless, the wise men's failure causes the king to call Daniel.

On a psychological level, the modern reader might ask why he waited to call Daniel, considering his earlier success. The text does not give us the king's motives, but the delay does differentiate Daniel from those who used traditional dream interpretation techniques and emphasizes his superiority, who is wise only because of the gift Yahweh has given him.

That Nebuchadnezzar still really hasn't "gotten it" is indicated by the parenthetical comment at the end of verse 8. He refers to Daniel by his Babylonian name, which connects him to the king's native god. Moreover, he speaks of Daniel as the one in whom the "spirit of the holy gods" dwells. Being a polytheist, Nebuchadnezzar has the intellectual framework to subsume Yahweh into his already existing theology.

The king then relates the contents of his dream. Its main feature is a huge tree in the middle of the land. This tree provides shade for all the animals, and its branches are the home of all the birds. The tree is the cosmic tree. It is planted in the "middle of the land," thus a kind of *axis mundi*. It is a symbol of fertility, growth, and prosperity. It is not only a symbol of life, but also a life-giver, providing sustenance and protection to the animals.

This use of the tree as an image of the life-giving nature of the king has previously been used in biblical tradition (cf. Ezek. 17:1–10; 31:3–14, both also in judgment contexts). The story also connects with the ancient Near East. There is little about a "sacred" or "cosmic" tree in the literature of Mesopotamia, but the tree occurs as a major motif in the iconography. As Parpola has pointed out, "the Tree represents the divine world order maintained by the king as the representative of the god Assur, embodied in the winged disk hovering above the tree." He alerts us to the fact that sometimes the king takes the place of the tree in the iconography; "in such scenes the king is portrayed as the human personification of the Tree. Thus if the Tree symbolized the divine world order, then the king himself represented the realization of that order in man, in other words, a true image of God, the Perfect Man." The implications for Daniel 4 are clear: Nebuchadnezzar's dream shows that he identifies himself with the cosmic tree; he is the keeper of the cosmos, the true image of God, the Perfect Man.

After the description of the tree, the king narrates the plot. It begins with the appearance of a "messenger" (an Aramaic word better translated "watchman" or "watcher," cf. NIV footnote). No doubt a supernatural being is meant (cf. the word's apposition with "holy one"), which reminds us of the frequent use of the word "watchers" for angels in intertestamental literature.¹²

The watcher barks orders for the dismantling of the cosmic tree. All that is to be left is the stump, and around the stump a bronze band is to be placed. The stump indicates that even though the tree is to be desolated, it is not to be killed. The roots are not touched. The band of iron and bronze that is placed around the stump is a mystery to interpreters. Perhaps it emphasizes the fact that the tree is not to be killed, since the band protects what is left. This interpretive approach would be strengthened if such a practice were known from the ancient Near East, but no such evidence is available. Others argue that the mention of the band is the first move from tree imagery to beast imagery. Indeed, the metaphors of the dream are a mixed lot, moving from tree to beast; the tree becomes a beast wandering the earth for "seven times," usually understood to be years.¹³

The dream ends with the watcher's proclamation concerning the motive behind this desolation. It is clearly expressed in verse 17: "that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men."

With his account of the dream concluded, Nebuchadnezzar turns with confidence to Daniel in order to hear its interpretation.

The Dream Interpretation (4:19–27)

THE CHAPTER UP to this point has been a first-person testimony of the king. The narrative has the ring of a royal inscription, but now the first-person address is displaced by a third-person narrator, who describes the interpretation and the fulfillment of the dream.

Daniel hesitates to give the interpretation. He knows what it means, but its message is so horrifying that he takes no pleasure in relating it to Nebuchadnezzar. The dynamic between Daniel and the king is a remarkable one, considering that this is the king who destroyed Jerusalem, but God's prophet shows concern for the well-being of the king, not vindictiveness.

After receiving encouragement from the king, Daniel reveals the referent of the tree symbol. It is Nebuchadnezzar himself, whose person is the center of the Babylonian world empire, which provides protection and sustenance to the people who inhabit that empire's vast boundaries. Since Nebuchadnezzar is the tree, he is also the subject of the coming judgment. As the tree will be desolated, so he will be desolated. As the subject of the

dream will be reduced to an animal-like state, so Nebuchadnezzar will be reduced from his humanity and become beast-like.

This is the message of judgment that confronts Nebuchadnezzar, but it is a conditional message. Daniel's advice is to avoid sin and be kind. In other words, he should not fall prey to the temptation to think himself a god. In spite of his greatness, he must retain his humility.

The Fulfillment of the Dream (4:28–33)

THE NARRATIVE DOES not let Daniel's hope live long. Verse 28 reports in a summarizing fashion, "All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar." The next few verses report the details of the tragedy.

While the narrative gives an immediate report of Nebuchadnezzar's fall, we learn from verse 29 that a period of twelve months passed before the crucial moment. We are perhaps to understand that the dream and its interpretation frightened Nebuchadnezzar into a temporary compliance. Or perhaps he pretty much continued his sinful (v. 27) course, but God waited until this moment of monumental pride to exercise his judgment. We cannot be sure.

In any case, a year after the dream experience, Nebuchadnezzar was taking a walk on the roof of his palace in Babylon. It is not unusual that he was on the roof of his house, since roofs were flat in the ancient Near East and therefore provided living space. From this obviously high point, he got a good view of the city, and he marveled at its grandeur. As we learn from ancient texts and the results of archaeology, the Babylon of Nebuchadnezzar was grand indeed. According to Michael Roaf,

Babylon contained two of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, the Hanging Gardens and the city walls. The location of the Hanging Gardens is in doubt but the walls have been traced. The outer wall stretched for more than 8 kilometers and, according to Herodotus, had enough space on top to enable a four-horse chariot to turn around.¹⁴

Nebuchadnezzar had much to do with the greatness of Babylon. From biblical and ancient Near Eastern records contemporary with his reign, we know he had great wealth and was an accomplished builder. He gave the orders and paid the bills. However, his power and accomplishments led to a pride that blinded him from broader realities. He lost sight of the fact that he could only do these things as God gave him the power and ability. His pride led him to make unthinkable claims, especially in the light of the vivid warning he received a year before: "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?" (v. 30, italics added).

While God gave him time after his first warning, no time elapses ("the words were still on his lips," v. 31) before a heavenly voice decrees his doom. From being the most powerful man in the world, he is reduced to roaming the steppe like an animal. As Calvin points out, this description does not mean that he thought himself an animal. His insanity¹6 drives him to the open spaces, where he acts like an animal, and his neglect of hygiene leads to an animal-like appearance. The appropriateness of the affliction is noted by Fewell, who states: "A man who thinks he is like a god must become a beast to learn that he is only a human being."

Healing and Concluding Doxology (4:34–37)

WE GET LITTLE insight into Nebuchadnezzar's mental processes. But we are told that the divine prescription works. At the appointed time (the end of the "seven times," cf. v. 25) Nebuchadnezzar "raised [his] eyes toward heaven, and [his] sanity was restored" (v. 34). The action of looking toward heaven is obviously meant as an acknowledgment of God's ultimate superiority. Nebuchadnezzar now understands his place in the scheme of things. He may indeed be powerful relative to the rest of humanity, but he is far from the most powerful being in the universe. Even more important, he understands, at least momentarily, that whatever power he does enjoy is as a gift from God. If it is foolish to say to a human king "What are you doing?" (Eccl. 8:4), how much more foolish is it for a human king to say to the divine king, "What have you done?" (Dan. 4:35). He is the "King of heaven" (v. 37).

Thus, Nebuchadnezzar is restored to sanity and to his relative grandeur as great king of Babylon. The lesson is learned and the moral of the story is

the last word: "Those who walk in pride he is able to humble" (v. 37).

Bridging Contexts

Who is in control? As we turn our attention to the relevance of Daniel 4 today, we are tempted to pick up quickly on verse 37b. That God humbles the proud is a message as clearly relevant to today as it was at the time of Nebuchadnezzar. However, to move directly to this important moral lesson bypasses the overarching concern of the chapter, which is that God protects his faithful people in spite of the odds. The purpose of the story is to encourage their confidence in the light of their helplessness before a seemingly all-powerful human ruler.

After all, while most people are not bound in chains and forced into slave labor, Nebuchadnezzar controls their fate, at least seemingly. This account of his dream and madness rips away the facade and shows the reality of who is in control—not Nebuchadnezzar, but God, who calls the shots. Again, fitting in with a major theme of the book, this chapter teaches that God is sovereign (see Introduction). He uses Nebuchadnezzar as he uses all human powers, even those hostile to his name, for his own purposes. Nebuchadnezzar is Yahweh's tool. The king wins victories only when God gives them to him (Dan. 1:1–2); he understands his dreams only when God reveals their meaning through Daniel, his servant (chs. 2 and 4). Nebuchadnezzar cannot harm a hair on the head of one of God's people (ch. 3). The book of Daniel reveals that the Babylonian king is powerless in his own right.

Nebuchadnezzar himself has a hard time seeing it this way. After all, he leads the army, and his treasuries pay for the tremendous building efforts that take place during his reign. As he looks at other men and women around him, he obviously is the most powerful. Not only can he make and break other individuals, but whole nations bow before him. He sits on his throne and people cower because they know he has the power of life and death over them.

The book of Daniel, however, does not portray Nebuchadnezzar as an unsympathetic figure. Daniel appears to care about him and seems honestly chagrined when a difficult fate is decreed for him. As readers, we feel the same ambivalence. The doxological introduction to this chapter in

particular makes us feel that Nebuchadnezzar is on our side again, and throughout the chapter there is no harmful move against God's people. Indeed, after another failure of his native band of dream interpreters to come through for him, he quickly sends for Daniel, whom he compliments from his pagan perspective as having the "spirit of the holy gods" in him.

However, even if we, along with Daniel, want Nebuchadnezzar to avoid his terrifying fate, the text does not allow our hopes to blossom. Although chronologically there is a gap of twelve months between the warning (v. 27) and the fulfillment of its threat, narratively there is no time, for the very next verse (v. 28) quickly tells us "all this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar."

The danger of pride. When we turn to the warning and its consequences, the account becomes a story of the danger of pride. Pride, in the negative sense, is a conception of one's self-worth that exceeds the bounds of propriety. In the Bible, as we will see in the next section, those bounds are clearly associated with seeing our every achievement, status, and possession as gifts from God.

In our present story, Nebuchadnezzar's vision of his accomplishments focuses solely on himself. As he looks out on the great city of Babylon, he sees the work of his own hands alone. Thus, God gives him a traumatic lesson to teach him the source of all his abilities and capacities by removing even his reason. Let Nebuchadnezzar glory in himself now as he roams the wilderness with the other animals, ripping grass from the ground with his teeth.

His reason, his exalted position, his wealth, and his power are ultimately returned to him, but only after he acknowledges God's ultimate sovereignty. His restoration begins with the simple gesture of looking to heaven—a cry for help and the recognition of a superior power. It culminates in the praises delivered at the beginning and end of the chapter. God took this prideful, self-centered man and humbled him. Once he acknowledged that "all the peoples of the earth [including himself] are regarded as nothing" (v. 35), God makes him something again.

Is this a lesson for all of us? Again we are faced with the question of the relevance for us of a historical account that could have a unique, time-bound significance. After all, we are speaking of someone who played a special role in the history of God's redemption. In one sense, none of us is

like Nebuchadnezzar. But we have already seen that the historical narratives, particularly those in the first part of Daniel, have a broader purpose than simply historical remembrance. Earlier we quoted 1 Corinthians 10:6 to that effect; here let me cite Romans 15:4: "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

Nonetheless, we must also reckon with another source of discontinuity. Nebuchadnezzar was no ordinary human in another sense; he was king of the most powerful political entity in the world. In a sense, his power far exceeded that of any individual living today. The president of the United States has been called the most powerful individual alive, but unlike Nebuchadnezzar he is a temporary and elected official with restricted powers. On a human level, Nebuchadnezzar had none of those restrictions.

But even though Nebuchadnezzar may be an extreme example, pride potentially resides in all human beings. But does all pride get the same dramatic treatment as Nebuchadnezzar, or was the psalmist right when he said in Psalm 73:3–12:

I envied the arrogant
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
They have no struggles;
their bodies are healthy and strong.
They are free from the burdens common to man;
they are not plagued by human ills.
Therefore pride is their necklace;
they clothe themselves with violence.
From their callous hearts comes iniquity;
the evil conceits of their minds know no limits.
They scoff, and speak with malice;
in their arrogance they threaten oppression.
Their mouths lay claim to heaven,
and their tongues take possession of the earth.
Therefore their people turn to them

and drink up waters in abundance.

They say, "How can God know?

Does the Most High have knowledge?"
This is what the wicked are like—
always carefree, they increase in wealth.

This we will explore in the next section.

The example of Jesus. But before we turn to Contemporary Significance, we need to introduce one more perspective on the passage that will also be more fully developed in the next section. We have already recognized that Jesus himself indicates that there are many passages of the Old Testament that pertain to his coming (Luke 24:25–27, 44–49). As Augustine said so well, "the New Testament in the Old is concealed, the Old is in the New revealed."

Even without Jesus' invitation and Augustine's catchy motto, how could those of us who read the New Testament fail to think of Christ in the light of Nebuchadnezzar's pride and shame? After all, Nebuchadnezzar was a mere man who glorified himself as if he were a god. Paul sings the following praise concerning Jesus (Phil. 2:6–11):

Who, being in the very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be
grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

What can we make of the truly glorious one, God himself, who voluntarily humbles himself to take on the flesh of humankind in the light of a mortal

Contemporary Significance

TAKING COMFORT IN knowing God is in control. As mentioned above, the overarching message of this chapter repeats an already common theme in the book. No matter what the odds, God is in control. Fate, or even intentional evil, may seem to have the upper hand against us, but the reality is that God is in control. In the present chapter, we observe this as God effortlessly reduces the most powerful man in the most sophisticated city in the world to a beast-like state in the wilderness.

God's people are called to take comfort in this truth, whether they lived at the time of Nebuchadnezzar, at a later time of persecution, or even today. Today Christians in certain parts of the world feel the chain of persecution and oppression because of their faith. Just within the past few months of the time of the writing of this commentary, the media has reported incredible instances of Christian persecution at the hands of government authorities. A recent issue of *Christianity Today* contains reports of execution by beheading of two Filipino Christians in Saudi Arabia, of government officials who interfere with the spreading of the gospel in Serbia, and of attacks on the house churches of China.¹⁹

We as Christians in America and England, though chafing at occasional restrictions of the exercise of our religion, do not really experience true religious persecution at the hands of the state. Nonetheless, all Christians, including those of us who have unprecedented freedom to exercise religion, understand the feeling of facing an obstacle that seems insuperable. We all encounter an enemy over which we seem to have no power, whether that foe is a crippling disability, a psychological disorder, a terminal disease, an abusive spouse, or the like. In this sense, the message of Daniel is for all of us, not just the politically oppressed. No one escapes the frustrations and chaos of a world suffering from the effects of the Fall (Rom. 8:18–27).

God humbles the proud. But is the message of Daniel 4 true? Is God able to humble those who walk in pride (v. 37)? Is God able to defeat those who harm us and overcome the obstacles to life and faith that threaten to engulf us? Or is Daniel 4 just a thrilling story with little connection to reality?

(1) We have seen above that the composer of Psalm 73 had his doubts. It seemed to him that the arrogant had no problems. The Teacher in the book of Ecclesiastes struggled as well. His faith taught that the godly would prosper and arrogant and evil people would languish, but that is not what he saw in the world. Not only that, but he saw death as the ultimate victor over life, rendering all the good deeds and achievements of life meaningless. Even in death, the wicked were honored: "There is a time when a man lords it over others to his own hurt. Then too, I saw the wicked buried—those who used to come and go from the holy place and receive praise in the city where they did this" (Eccl. 8:9b–10).

Isn't this also our experience? Who are the famous, the powerful, the wealthy, the tanned and smiling faces we see out there? Are they the faces of the saints? Occasionally, but more often than not they are the faces of those who sneer at religion and serve to undermine it.

But if we look more closely at the Bible, we do see that God humbles the proud. It began in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve enjoyed a close and intimate relationship with their Creator in the Garden. As the well-known story continues, however, their trust in God diminished, and they came, at the prompting of the serpent, to trust their own judgment. In a word, pride instigated them to break the one commandment that their friend and God told them to observe. As a result, their idyllic life in the Garden was transformed to a life of hard work and drudgery "under the sun." They exchanged their glory for shame and ended up being humbled.²⁰

Another story with notable connections to Daniel 4 is the account of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. Again, pride led to rebellion, even an assault on heaven itself. Human beings presumed to be godlike by building a staircase to heaven. God, however, intervened, reducing the arrogant to humility and scattering them over the face of the earth.

The humble faithful can find comfort in these accounts of the reversal of pride into shame. Indeed, the psalmist of Psalm 73 finally came to his senses (vv. 17–22). He was like a "brute beast" before God until he "entered the sanctuary of God" and "understood [the] final destiny" of the arrogant and prosperous people, who ignored or attacked God. In other words, his vision was expanded beyond immediate circumstances. While the proud ultimately will be "swept away by terrors" (v. 19), he proclaims as one of the oppressed faithful (vv. 23–24):

Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.

Certainly, I would agree that the passage cannot be read as a certain affirmation of life after death. However, I think it is wrong to attribute to this psalmist, struggling with the fact that proper rewards and punishments do not seem to be handed out in this life, a naive idea that "it's all going to turn out all right after all in this life."

And apart from Old Testament anticipation, the New Testament makes it even more clear that God is in control. He has won a victory over an enemy even more powerful than Nebuchadnezzar, over a kingdom even more deadly and oppressive than the Babylonian empire. He has defeated Satan and death itself. The book of Revelation, often likening the powers of evil to Babylon of old, shows God's ultimate victory on behalf of his faithful people.²¹

(2) But before we pass on, we cannot neglect a warning. While Daniel 4 demonstrates God's ability to humble the arrogant leader of a foreign oppressive empire—an enemy "out there," so to speak—we must be careful concerning the pride that can infect our own lives. Christians are not immune from a pride that removes our eyes from God and places them squarely on ourselves. Indeed, it is precisely in situations like ours in the West, where we do not face active persecution, that this danger is most obvious.

After all, Christians have succeeded in business, in sports, in media, and in religion. We run large companies, score touchdowns in the NFL, write popular books, and pastor megachurches. The danger is there as we watch the thousands (or even the tens of thousands) of people who flock into our church to feel confident about the attractiveness of our preaching. The danger is there to feel satisfaction in the number of books we have sold or awards we have won. We have the same tendencies that Adam had as he walked intimately with God, but then trusted his own judgment more than God.

In other words, the message that God humbles the proud is not only a comfort; it is a warning to us all. With the psalmist (and unlike

Nebuchadnezzar) we must remember Psalm 127:1:

Unless the LORD builds the house,its builders labor in vain.Unless the LORD watches over the city,the watchmen stand guard in vain.

With Paul, rather than praising ourselves for our accomplishments, we must remember to boast only in the Lord (1 Cor. 1:29, 31; 2 Cor. 10:17).

Redemptive shame. This message is an important one to remember in our present day and age, where self-esteem is in and guilt and shame are out. Many people think that shame is inherently evil and that we must foster a strong sense of self-worth in ourselves and in others.

Don't get me wrong. There is such a thing as a false sense of shame. Indeed, we must help people recognize when their shame is based on an incorrect perception or a false standard of success.²² But there is also a true and redemptive sense of shame that we should not hide under the carpet. A true shame is a shame engendered as a result of our rebellion and sin before God. It is when our sin is exposed before God and, at times, before other people, that our embarrassment can propel us into the arms of God.

This redemptive shame is the shame experienced by Nebuchadnezzar. His overweening pride was rightfully exposed, and he was shown to be a brute beast on his own power; even his sanity was a gift from God. His humiliating experience compelled him to look at God again, and he was restored to his former dignity.

Again, several psalms illustrate this dynamic. Psalm 30 embeds the story of someone whom God blessed so that he prospered greatly. However, he forgot that his success was a gift and began to focus his eyes on himself. At that point, God turned his back on the psalmist and let him feel the shame of powerlessness (Ps. 30:6–7):

When I felt secure, I said,
"I will never be shaken."
O LORD, when you favored me,
you made my mountain stand firm;

but when you hid your face, I was dismayed.

This psalm, however, is not a lament; it is a psalm of thanksgiving. The shame that the author experienced caused him to flee to God again. The result is clear: "You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy" (v. 11).

Our God is a God who turns shame into rejoicing. But he does not do this by some sort of magical fiat. The gospel story is the story of God himself experiencing shame on our behalf. He subjected himself to the humiliation of the cross. Christ felt shame, but he underwent the experience in order to free us from shame and invite us to the glory of the resurrection. "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2).

Jesus endured the shame of the cross because of joy—joy in glorifying his Father, and joy in redeeming his brothers and sisters (see Heb. 12:11–12). We are invited to bear his disgrace and offer ourselves as a sacrifice of praise to God's glory and goodness.²³

Daniel 5:1-31

¹King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them. ²While Belshazzar was drinking his wine, he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. ³So they brought in the gold goblets that had been taken from the temple of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. ⁴As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.

⁵Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. ⁶His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way.

⁷The king called out for the enchanters, astrologers and diviners to be brought and said to these wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing and tells me what it means will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around his neck, and he will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom."

⁸Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant. ⁹So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more pale. His nobles were baffled.

¹⁰The queen, hearing the voices of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet hall. "O king, live

forever!" she said. "Don't be alarmed! Don't look so pale! ¹¹There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. King Nebuchadnezzar your father—your father the king, I say—appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. ¹²This man Daniel, whom the king called Belteshazzar, was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding, and also the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve difficult problems. Call for Daniel, and he will tell you what the writing means."

13So Daniel was brought before the king, and the king said to him, "Are you Daniel, one of the exiles my father the king brought from Judah? ¹⁴I have heard that the spirit of the gods is in you and that you have insight, intelligence and outstanding wisdom. ¹⁵The wise men and enchanters were brought before me to read this writing and tell me what it means, but they could not explain it. ¹⁶Now I have heard that you are able to give interpretations and to solve difficult problems. If you can read this writing and tell me what it means, you will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around your neck, and you will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom."

¹⁷Then Daniel answered the king, "You may keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to someone else. Nevertheless, I will read the writing for the king and tell him what it means.

¹⁸"O king, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor. ¹⁹Because of the high position he gave him, all the peoples and nations and men of

every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled. ²⁰But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. ²¹He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like cattle; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone he wishes.

22"But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this.
23 Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways.
24 Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription.

²⁵"This is the inscription that was written: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN ²⁶"This is what these words mean:

Mene: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.

²⁷Tekel: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.

²⁸Peres: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians."

²⁹Then at Belshazzar's command, Daniel was clothed in purple, a gold chain was placed around his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom.

³⁰That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, ³¹and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two.

Original Meaning

As WE READ Daniel 5, we begin to get a sense of *déjà vu*. Though many of the faces are different, the genre, the plot, the sins, the props, and the themes of this chapter echo from earlier ones. To begin a partial list of similarities, we once again have a court narrative. Daniel 5 gives us an account of Daniel the wise man and prophet in the court of a foreign king. Further, as in Daniel 1, 2, and 4 we witness a court contest (as opposed to a court conflict, as in chs. 3 and 6). Unlike Daniel 2, however, the focus is not on the conflict between the Babylonian wise men and Daniel, though this is an important element of the story.

As in chapters 2 and 4, Daniel can interpret an enigmatic dream or vision where the native Babylonian wisdom teachers fail. Like Daniel 4, the king demonstrates incredible arrogance and is put in his place by God. Furthermore, the account of the conquest of Jerusalem in chapter 1 paid special attention to the theft of the temple vessels (1:2), and these play an important role in the present chapter.

Dana Fewell argues for a connection between the setting of Daniel 3 and that of chapter 5. In both, the king (Nebuchadnezzar in ch. 3 and Belshazzar, "his son," in ch. 5) convenes the important people of his empire. In chapter 3, the assembly is for the dedication of a statue, while here it is for a banquet. Fewell argues, though the text is not explicit on the point, that both events were public displays of loyalty toward the king. Perhaps she is correct, but the reticence of the text will keep us from developing this theme at length.

Nonetheless, as we proceed with our section-by-section interpretation of this chapter, we will also notice new emphases. Most notably, we observe a different attitude expressed by Daniel toward the foreign king. Prior to this moment, Daniel had been favorably disposed toward the king. Though responsible for the downfall of the Judean people, Daniel cared for Nebuchadnezzar and did not rejoice in his downfall. The king had shown himself someone quick to learn from his mistakes. Here, however, Daniel has little time or concern for Belshazzar. He seems only too happy to tell him of his dire fate. We will be exploring this matter further.

Because of the similarity between Daniel 4 and 5, we are not surprised that the theme of the chapters may be formulated in a similar way. Daniel 4 focused on Nebuchadnezzar's pride, Daniel 5 on Belshazzar's. The latter's pride will be expressed in the context of idolatry in a way that Nebuchadnezzar's was not (though see comments on ch. 3). The major difference between chapters 4 and 5 is in the response of the king. In Daniel 4, Nebuchadnezzar ultimately repents of his arrogance and is restored to his former position. In Daniel 5, Belshazzar does not repent and is destroyed.

Thus, the theme of Daniel 5 fits into the theme of the whole book: *In spite of present appearances, God is in control*. This theme is important in the context of the oppression of God's people at the hands of arrogant pagan rulers like Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar. In the case of the former, God shows how he can overcome the pride of a powerful ruler by humbling him into repentance. In the case of the latter, God shows what he does with one who remains unrepentant. In either case, God shows himself to be more powerful than these hostile yet powerful kings, thus again giving comfort to his faithful, suffering people.

The main character of Daniel 5 is Belshazzar, a king whom we have not yet met and whose presence in the narrative raises interesting and difficult historical questions. The transition from Daniel 4 to 5 is an abrupt one, and Belshazzar is thrust on the stage with no indication of the passage of time or the death of Nebuchadnezzar. This information is unnecessary for the purposes of the narrative, but it does raise questions in our mind, particularly since the rather full extrabiblical accounts of the lineage of neo-Babylonian kings make no mention of a king called Belshazzar. After the death of Nebuchadnezzar in 562 B.C., he was succeeded by his son Amel-Marduk (the Evil-Merodach of 2 Kings 25:27) for a short period of time (562–560 B.C.). He was executed, probably at the behest of his successor, Neriglissar, who ruled only a few years himself (560–556 B.C.). Neriglissar was succeeded by his son Labashi-Marduk, who reigned for only a few

months before he was executed by the party that brought Nabonidus to the throne. Nabonidus is recorded as the last king of the Babylonians, since he ruled until the time Cyrus entered Babylon and brought his kingdom to an end (539 B.C.).

So what about Belshazzar? Until recently Belshazzar was thought to be one of those errors in the Bible's understanding of history that led many to doubt its accuracy. However, after the discovery and decipherment of cuneiform tablets began in the nineteenth century, we began to learn more and more about the period in question. As a result, Belshazzar emerged from the shadows as a definite historical character. Today we have abundant textual witness to the fact that he was the son of Nabonidus. More than that, Belshazzar was coregent and actually in charge of Babylon during his father's ten-year absence from the capital city, thus explaining the reference to him as king.²

The story of Nabonidus's absence from Babylon is an intriguing one, but we will only give the mere outline of the story. In short, Nabonidus was a devotee of the moon god Sin, the chief god of his ancestral homeland Haran. While not a monotheist, he was interested in promoting the interests of Sin, which apparently angered the powerful Marduk priesthood. Evidence exists that his son, Belshazzar, did not share his devotion to Sin and may even have led a party that, while not forcing Nabonidus to abdicate, did result in his abandonment of the capital to take up residence at a site called Teima, located at an oasis in what is today Saudi Arabia.

But much of the story is clouded in obscurity, and other motivations may have been important for the move. Teima was the location of an important trade route and Nabonidus was protecting this trade route. It seems likely, however, that the religious tensions played an important role in his decision.

This information explains, at least in broad terms, the presence of Belshazzar as ruler in Babylon even though he is not listed as one of the kings of Babylon. While not all the questions have been answered, we have moved a long way from the days when Belshazzar was considered a figment of a later writer's imagination. We should remember this when we encounter similar problems, and indeed we will as early as the end of our chapter and the next as we meet a new figure, Darius the Mede.

Daniel 5 may be outlined as follows: (1) the profanation of the holy vessels (5:1–4); (2) the enigmatic writing on the wall (5:5–12); (3) Daniel's

interpretation of the inscription (5:13–28); (4) reward and punishment (5:29–31).

The Profanation of the Holy Vessels (5:1–4)

KING BELSHAZZAR MAKES a sudden and unanticipated appearance in the narrative. He is not introduced; he springs into the action. No one today doubts that the last king of Babylon had a son named Belshazzar, who ruled as coregent during the last days of the empire. Skepticism remains,⁴ however, on some of the details, most notably the narrative's description of Nebuchadnezzar as his "father" (v. 2). Indeed, though not impossible, it is unlikely that Belshazzar was the son of Nebuchadnezzar in the narrow, biological sense. Historical records indicate that Nabonidus, himself not a biological descendant of Nebuchadnezzar, was Belshazzar's father. It is more likely that "father" is used here in the sense of "predecessor." ⁵

In the story itself, we learn little about Belshazzar from straightforward description; his character is revealed through his actions and speeches. He throws a huge banquet for one thousand of his nobles. The description of this boisterous party reminds us of the opening of the book of Esther, where Xerxes' banquet provided the setting for the first story of that book. That banquet, according to Karen Jobes⁶ and others, was intended to unite the leaders of the empire on the eve of Xerxes' attempted conquest of Greece. The broader textual and historical setting of Daniel 5 suggests that a similar political-military purpose was at work in Belshazzar's mind.

In a word, the Persians are knocking at the door of the Babylonian empire. Indeed, as the end of the story indicates, they will take the city of Babylon the very next day. Extrabiblical sources, both cuneiform and Greek (Herodotus and Xenophon), give us more information about the events leading up to the fall of Babylon on October 12, 539 B.C.⁷

The final victory may have been a surprise attack on Babylon. Indeed, Herodotus and Xenophon indicate that the final raid on Babylon took place during a nighttime banquet. But even if the final raid was sudden, it could not have been unanticipated. The Babylonian Chronicle indicates that just a couple of days earlier, Cyrus the Persian had defeated Nabonidus and the Babylonian army near Sippar (approximately fifty miles from Babylon). Nabonidus had fled the scene, though not to the capital.

Belshazzar must have known that an attack would come sooner or later. It was in this context that the banquet described in our chapter took place. Was it to rally and encourage the leaders? To give them a diversion in the face of the onslaught? To feast today for tomorrow we die? Perhaps a bit of all three, but we are safe to assume that tension permeated the air in the Babylonian capital at this time.

Wine flowed abundantly at the banquet. The king and his nobles drank deeply together. The text does not emphasize the drinking, however, to provide a moral lesson on the dangers of thinking under the influence of alcohol. No, the focus shifts to the holy goblets that Nebuchadnezzar had removed from the temple. These precious temple vessels are about to be profaned by being pressed into common use. We do not know much about how they were used in the rituals of the temple, but we do know that they were not intended for a raucous party. Belshazzar's impiety portends dire consequences.

We cannot be certain what was going on in Belshazzar's mind at this time. But surely he did not just run out of his everyday goblets and called for the spares. He surely had a particular propaganda purpose in mind. But what? He may have been making claims to power by comparing himself to his "father" Nebuchadnezzar. He trifles with Nebuchadnezzar's war booty, a booty that Nebuchadnezzar himself apparently thought too precious actually to use. Perhaps in the midst of the present crisis Belshazzar is claiming more power than Nebuchadnezzar, a boast vain enough in itself.

But the challenge Belshazzar presents goes even further in his mind. Perhaps the challenge is leveled against Yahweh himself. Miller points out that Daniel had predicted the Persian victory over Babylonia during Belshazzar's reign (8:1–4, 15–20), and already by the time of Isaiah God's prophets were indicating such an end to the one-time oppressors (Isa. 44:28; 45:1); but how likely is it that Belshazzar is familiar with Isaiah's prophecy?¹⁰ While some scholars argue that Belshazzar probably offended many foreign religious cults that night, our text indicates that Yahweh is the sole focus. In the final analysis, it does not matter what was going on in Belshazzar's mind; his very act is like spitting in the eye of God.

But Belshazzar goes even further in his sacrilege. He is not only committing blasphemy, he combines it with idolatry. Here is where his profanation surpasses that of Nebuchadnezzar. He uses God's holy goblets

to toast the lifeless idols of his own religion. He spits in God's eye, as it were, and then he goes over to a statue that he himself has created (v. 4) and expects that lifeless hunk to protect him from what is to come.

The manner in which the narrative describes Belshazzar's affirmation of idolatry shows how ridiculous it is. Belshazzar's gods are of the same material as the goblets from Yahweh's temple. The latter are important, holy, and precious, but they are not God himself. Those objects made out of precious metals are not objects of worship, but Belshazzar's perverted religion puts their material cousins at the heart of his confidence and hope for the future.

The Enigmatic Writing on the Wall (5:5–12)

THE ACTION OF this chapter moves quickly and with sudden surprises. Just as Belshazzar has appeared without introduction, so a hand suddenly appears without explanation. Of course, a disembodied hand writing a message on the wall of the palace needs no explanation to recognize a supernatural occurrence.

This hand is surely the hand of God. The faithful reader of the past and present has no doubts who is behind the writing, though to be sure, Belshazzar has no clue. As a polytheist, he could have seen the hand as controlled by any of a number of different divinities. Immediately, however, he suspects that the enigmatic writing has a message that intends calamity toward him. His reaction is shock and utter fright. He is in extreme distress, perhaps even implying by the last clause that he has lost control of his most basic bodily functions, which has undermined his posture of composure.¹¹

The reference to the "fingers" of God should not surprise us. Though God has no body, his actions are frequently described metaphorically as the acts of his hand. Indeed, in three other notable Scripture references, God's finger is at work. In response to the plagues, the Egyptian magicians remarked, "This is the finger of God" (Ex. 8:19). Exodus also describes the commandments as written by God's finger on the stone tablets (31:18). Finally, the heavens themselves are "the work of [his] fingers" (Ps. 8:3).

The throne room of the kings of Babylon was excavated by Koldewey in 1899.¹² Of course, the message recorded here has not been found, nor are the walls intact, but enough is left to show that the walls were coated with white gypsum, which means that the writing would be clear on the wall,

especially considering the text's note that the writing took place "near the lampstand." The public nature of the writing as well as the fact that the wise men and finally Daniel also read the writing belie the idea that this is some sort of private vision or drunken hallucination.¹³

Belshazzar cannot make head nor tails of the writing, so he calls for the wise men. By now the reader of the book of Daniel cannot help but picture these men as incompetent fools, and they don't disappoint our expectations. The king entices them with the promise of great reward, virtually offering them royalty. To be third in the kingdom means to rank only after himself and his father, Nabonidus. ¹⁴ That a coregency is intended is underlined by the purple garment and the necklace, which surely denoted royal authority.

In spite of the reward, the wise men are baffled by the inscription. This means at the very least that they cannot interpret the significance of the inscription. It may also imply that it was written in some kind of code, because it has been written in Aramaic, the common language of the day. Their inability cannot be the result of a simple inability to read the script, if it were written out in a normal manner. The text ultimately does not let us know.

At this point, the queen whisks onto the stage without detailed introduction or explanation, again leading to speculation. Who is the queen? She has not been attending the party, but she enters at the moment of crisis, acting with authority and dignified confidence. We know that Belshazzar's wives and concubines are already in attendance (v. 3). All the circumstantial evidence points to the queen mother, a figure of importance in many ancient Near Eastern societies. Ever since Josephus the queen here has been identified as the queen mother.

But whose mother? If Belshazzar's mother, we do not know her name. If the mother of his father Nabonidus, then it is the venerated Adad-guppi, who lived to the ripe old age of 104; she may be the one who brought Nabonidus and his son to the throne. However, we know from historical sources that she died a few years before this moment. The queen therefore may have been Nebuchadnezzar's wife, Nitocris, still exerting her influence more than two decades later. Herodotus, the Greek historian, celebrates her wisdom. Greek historian, celebrates her wisdom.

Whoever she is, she has the solution to Belshazzar's problem: "Get Daniel." Daniel has come through in the past in similar situations. She

chides Belshazzar for his panic, unbefitting a king, and for his ignorance of Daniel, who had played an important role in Nebuchadnezzar's court. We can detect irritation in her voice concerning his demeaning of his illustrious royal predecessor. Indeed, Fewell argues that Daniel is not called immediately more out of disdain for his past association with Nebuchadnezzar than because of his age (around eighty at the time) and because of the twenty-three years that have passed since Nebuchadnezzar's death.¹⁷ Whatever the explanation, the scene is set for Daniel's grand entrance onto the scene.

Daniel's Interpretation of the Inscription (5:13–28)

SO FAR, MOST of the main characters—Belshazzar, the hand of God, the queen—have appeared suddenly and without introduction. In contrast, the author prepares us for Daniel's entrance. This is the third time that Daniel intervenes and succeeds where the Babylonian wise men fail (cf. Dan. 2 and 4). But when Daniel comes this time, he manifests a new attitude.

First the king speaks. A close reading of the text reveals a condescending attitude by Belshazzar toward this man who played such a significant role in Nebuchadnezzar's life, a role concerning which he is fully aware (cf. v. 22). The king first identifies him as one of the captives: "Are you Daniel, one of the exiles my father the king brought from Judah?" (v. 13). Such an address intends to remind Daniel of his place before Belshazzar. Belshazzar is king; Daniel is his captive. Calvin understood the tone of the king's speech when he states that "the king does not acknowledge his negligence but interrogates Daniel without shame—and interrogates him as if he were a prisoner." ¹⁸

Belshazzar then launches off a series of honorifics that cite Daniel's abilities and character, but again a close reading of the speech shows that the king himself does not endorse the reports. Twice he begins his words with "I have heard," once when speaking of Daniel's endowment with the divine spirit, insight, intelligence, and wisdom (v. 14), and again when saying that Daniel is one who can give interpretations and solve difficult problems (v. 16). Contrast this with what Nebuchadnezzar had earlier simply asserted: "I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you, and no mystery is too difficult for you. Here is my dream; interpret it for me" (4:9). Belshazzar's flattery is more provisional and his request for interpretation,

accordingly, is conditional: "If you can read this writing and tell me what it means ..." (v. 16).

Belshazzar's speech reveals that his expectations are not high, but he holds out the same reward of royal status to the aged Israelite wise man standing before him as he earlier did to the hapless Babylonian wise men (v. 16).

Daniel has not missed the slight. The abruptness and the content of the king's lengthy speech indicates the prophet's annoyance and dislike for this second-rate monarch. In earlier chapters, when he spoke to Nebuchadnezzar, he used respect and concern. Again, Calvin has caught the flavor of the speech: "I have no doubt that he meant to speak roughly to the ungodly Belshazzar, a man beyond hope; but because there had been still some uprightness left in King Nebuchadnezzar and he had good hopes in him, he had treated him more gently." 19

Daniel begins by refusing the gift. He will interpret the writing on the wall free of charge. We will return to this topic again in the next section, because as it turns out Daniel will accept the reward. However, for now he alerts the king that his primary motivation is not worldly reward. Indeed, perhaps having read the inscription already, Daniel knows that the reward means nothing. The king has nothing really to give.

But before actually giving the interpretation, Daniel delivers a stinging rebuke to the king. Beginning with Samuel in his relation with Saul (cf. 1 Sam. 13, 15), a major role of the prophet has been to serve as the conscience of the king. True, this role was primarily directed toward the Israelite king. Whenever the latter fell to the temptation of power and forgot who the ultimate king was, the prophet was there to remind him (cf. also Nathan's relationship with David [2 Sam. 12], Elijah's with Ahab [1 Kings 18], and Jeremiah's with Jehoiakim [Jer. 36]). Now Belshazzar hears Daniel. He uses Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar's predecessor and by far superior, to redress the upstart, who is not only probably young and really the second in command to his father Nabonidus, but is also on the brink of disaster. Nebuchadnezzar was great, but when God confronted him, he ultimately acknowledged his subservience.

Belshazzar did not learn the lesson. He should have known better, thanks to the example of Nebuchadnezzar. Nonetheless, far from acknowledging his subservience to a greater power, Belshazzar went far beyond the sins of his predecessor by directly assaulting Yahweh through the profane and idolatrous use of the holy vessels of the temple. This admonition explains the presence of the hand and its inscription. The time is ripe for its interpretation.

For the first time, then, we as readers hear the words: "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN." As presented in the text, these are three different nouns, the first repeated for emphasis. As nouns, they are units of money and may be translated: "Mina, mina, shekel, and a half." The half could be either half a mina or half a shekel. Though in other contexts it appears to be the former, the context here seems to indicate a half shekel. Nonetheless, Daniel's interpretation takes these nouns and interprets them as verbal forms, passive participles to be exact. The three verbal roots in order may be translated "numbered," "weighed," and "divided."

Different rationales have been offered for the apparent discrepancy between the grammatical form of the words and Daniel's interpretation.²⁰ However, we must remember that Daniel is in the position of the divinely inspired interpreter and his answer is rightly explained by Towner as

based upon folk etymologies of the three words, each turning on a pun. The three nouns listed in verse 25 are treated as three passive verbs by Daniel in verses 26–28: MENE is related to the verb m-n-h "numbered"; TEKEL is related to the verb t-q-l, "weighed"; and PERES is construed as the verb p-r-s, "divided."²¹

As Goldingay has stated it, "Daniel uses [the writing] to make the statement refer to Belshazzar's being appointed, evaluated, and punished."²² In the interpretation, *parsin* is given in the singular form *peres*, and both are reminiscent of the name *Persia*, the nation that is about to devour the once mighty empire of Babylonia.

In an insightful recent article, Al Wolters argues that the Babylonian wise men stumbled because the inscription was written in scripta continua and without vocalization: *mn'tqlprs*. He goes on to say that "the interpretation given by Daniel divides this series into three words of three letters, each with three levels of meaning, depending on the vocalization chosen." The first two levels of meaning are as above—the letters divided and vocalized

as nouns and then as passive participles, though he interprets the third verb as "assessed" rather than "divided." The third level of interpretation, based on yet a third vocalization (*menah*, *tiqqal*, *paras*), indicates the consequences of God's judgment on Babylonia: "He has paid out, you are too light [pe'al of *qll*], Persia!" Wolters continues by arguing that the image of scales that weigh permeate all three levels and "gains further significance when we realize that the annual rising of Libra took place on the eve of Babylon's fall to the Persians."²⁴

Wolters's insightful interpretation may be supplemented by an article by Rabbi Dr. Michael Hilton, who points out the connections of the tower of Babel story in Genesis 11:1–9, which associates the beginning of Babylonia with a confusion of language, with Daniel 5, which associates its end with a confusion.²⁵

That Belshazzar has ruled at all—indeed, that Babylon has achieved ascendancy as the major power of the world—has been at God's sovereign determination, but it was a temporary period now at an end. Belshazzar and the Babylonians have not measured up, and so now another power will come to the throne, one dominated by Persia, which includes the Medes. No further explanation is needed from Daniel; the message is clear, and it spells doom.

Reward and Punishment (5:29-31)

GOD'S JUDGMENT IS double-edged. As he punishes his enemies, so he frees and rewards his people. Here, two individuals represent the dual fates of the godly and the ungodly.

(1) Belshazzar bestows the purple garments, the gold chain, and high political status on godly Daniel. Commentators have expressed much consternation as they try to figure out what is going on in the mind of Daniel. After all, earlier he had treated the possibility of reward with disdain, but now he accepts them without recorded objection. Perhaps Daniel waited until after the interpretation to accept reward in order not to have his ministry polluted by the promise of worldly reward, but the text does not say that. Perhaps he accepted the reward because he knew that within hours it would be meaningless, but the text does not say that either.

While the text does not give us a window to Daniel's motivation, the scene does communicate that his interpretation is true and that its truth is

even admitted by Belshazzar, the king. It also shows us that the godly ultimately receive their reward even from hostile and reluctant oppressors. Indeed, we might go further to point out that Belshazzar's downfall and Darius the Medes' ascendancy is a boon to the people of God as a whole. Though not narrated by the book of Daniel, the Persian-Median rise to power leads quickly to the Decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1–4), which allowed the return of the Jewish people to Palestine.

(2) The chapter ends by narrating the consequences of Belshazzar's ungodly acts. "That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two" (Dan. 5:30–31). We will reserve our discussion of the mysterious Darius the Mede until the next chapter, which is set during his reign. It appears that he was Cyrus's general, who made the final raid on Babylon and killed Belshazzar in the process. Thus, we witness the reward granted to insolence, idolatry, and blasphemy.

Bridging Contexts

Daniel, thus justifying our use of this material as a guide to our behavior.

We have also seen that these chapters dealing with history have the feel of a story rather than, say, a documentary. The latter would focus on a disclosure of the facts, an emphasis on what really happened; the former tells the account in a literarily satisfying manner. It selects events and shapes its presentation to support an important theological and/or ethical message. We are caught up in the intrigue, the suspense, the drama of the scene. We are drawn to change our beliefs, our attitudes, and our actions. History and story are not mutually exclusive categories. True, a substance of a story can be make-believe, but it can also be from real life.

Our point is that Daniel 5 is properly described as history, but it is more than brute fact history. Indeed, it is the genre of text that compels us to

understand this chapter as more than a simple report of what happened in the past. A proper reception of the story invites us to look for important theological and ethical principles that are still relevant for today (see below). As we take these principles and consider their appropriateness for today, we will do so through the prism of the New Testament, noting that there is always the possibility of discontinuity between the Old Testament story and our own situation.

The reticent narrator. Daniel 5 illustrates clearly an important characteristic that runs throughout the theological history of the Old Testament. Old Testament history with infrequent exceptions (e.g., Ezra 7–10; Neh. 1–7; 11–13) tells its story through the eyes of an unnamed narrator. In literary studies, this style is called third-person omniscient narration. That is, the narrator describes the action, reports speech, and interprets the significance of the events to us, the readers. He is a storyteller, who can move from one side of a battle to another, from the internal workings of one mind to another. In some Old Testament stories, he even tells us what passes through the mind of God.

Daniel 5 is not given to us from the perspective of Daniel, the character, but rather through the eyes of this unnamed narrator. While this form of narration is common in literature, literary scholars have pointed out that in the Bible it gives us the impression that we receive the story from a divine perspective.²⁷ Thus, this form of narration gives us a high level of confidence in the story. We trust this narrator.

We may further characterize our narrator in a way that helps us interpret the story and also gives us guidelines as we seek to bridge the horizon from the ancient world to the modern. In a word, the narrator of biblical stories is reticent. That is, he is spare in his commentary. As we read Daniel 5, we do not get much background description or explicit statement of motivations. We are thus left with a number of questions, as we have noted above: Why is Belshazzar holding a banquet? Who is the queen? Why couldn't the Babylonian wise men read the inscription? Why is Daniel upset with Belshazzar in a way that he was not with Nebuchadnezzar?

The reticence of the narrator invites our involvement as readers. It peaks our interest and gets us thinking deeply about what is going on. It is not that the story does not give us any clues. The narrator shows us rather than explicitly tells us important information about the plot and characters. He

describes the action and, in this chapter, narrates the characters' speeches in a way to shape our reaction.

As interpreters, it is our task to read between the lines without reading into the story elements that are not there—a fine line to walk, to be sure. However, our reading in the gaps must be justified by what is presented in the text itself; otherwise, our interpretation should be discounted as just so much eisegesis.

Déjà vu all over again. As we turn our attention to chapter 5 for principles that remain relevant for our contemporary situation, we again are struck by the repetition of themes from earlier chapters. Belshazzar's first and final episode in the stories of Daniel is marked by his arrogance, blasphemy, and idolatry.

(1) Arrogance. Pride was an issue in the preceding chapters, especially chapter 4. There we observed how Nebuchadnezzar, even though warned, succumbed to a promotion of himself, even above God. He looked at Babylon and gave himself the praise. As a result, God humbled him by reducing him to an animal-like state until he acknowledged God's superiority, at which time he was reinstated to his former human glory.

Belshazzar has not learned from his predecessor's example. He too exalts himself above God. The story illustrates his attitude by narrating his misuse of the holy temple vessels, and Daniel articulates this divine evaluation in his prophetic rebuke (vv. 22–23) even before lowering the boom of judgment on him. God humbles Belshazzar as well, but in this case there is no restoration. He is killed for his sin.

(2) *Blasphemy*. While repeating his predecessor's sin of arrogance, Belshazzar takes it to a new level of offense against Yahweh. He expresses his superiority not by taking inordinate pride in his own achievements, but by profaning the things associated with God. True, by virtue of their theft from the temple and their being handled by nonpriestly, non-Israelite hands, the vessels have already been profaned; but because of the use Belshazzar makes of them, he supersedes previous denigration of God's holy objects.

As we commented above, we do not know Belshazzar's motivation in bringing out the up-to-this-point unused temple vessels. On the level of conscious intention, was he tweaking the memory of his great royal predecessor or was he directly and knowingly attacking God himself? Possibly both, but even apart from a conscious intention for the latter, the

reality of the situation was that he was making common use of extremely holy objects, an attack on God himself.

Blasphemy is the act of dishonoring God through speech or actions, and Belshazzar does both here, by misusing objects associated with the worship of God and, in doing so, praising false gods (see next section on "Idolatry"). To be sure, it is not simply the fact that these goblets are holding alcohol, because the Bible is clear that there is nothing inherently evil about alcohol. But these goblets were only to be used in the worship of God, not for state banquets. Apparently even Nebuchadnezzar understood that. In essence, Belshazzar spit in the face of God.

(3) *Idolatry*. In regard to Belshazzar's blasphemous actions, we must remember that this Babylonian king would have acknowledged the existence and divine status of the Israelites' God. His action would not have been performed with a modern belief that the worship of God was a primitive superstition. No, Belshazzar would have acknowledged Yahweh as a legitimate deity, probably a minor deity of a minor and now disgraced people. But he also surely believed that his own native deities were much more powerful. After all, Babylonia had conquered Judah. Clearly Marduk, Sin, and the other chief Babylonian deities dominated Yahweh in the pantheon.

We see a similar attitude expressed by the Philistines during the childhood of Samuel. In 1 Samuel 4 we read about the Philistine defeat of the Israelite army under the leadership of Eli's two wicked sons, Hophni and Phinehas. These latter two men had thought to stem the military success of the Philistines by bringing the ark into the war camp. From their actions and speech, it is clear that they did not do this out of actual faith, but were treating the ark as a kind of magical box or relic.

As a result of their lack of faith, God allowed the Philistines to defeat the Israelites and capture the ark. It was now time for the Philistines to learn their lesson about the power of Yahweh. In 1 Samuel 5 the Philistines act like any other Near Eastern victor (including Nebuchadnezzar in Dan. 1) by taking the ark and placing it in the temple of their chief god, Dagon. This process acknowledges Yahweh's divine status while demonstrating his subservient position to Dagon.

The next day, however, the Philistines enter the temple to discover Dagon's statue fallen flat on its face before the ark. It is as if Dagon was

worshiping Yahweh! They then hoist the idol back on its feet, but when they return the next day, Dagon has fallen again, this time with a broken head and hands (like a dismembered military casualty). Then after an outbreak of tumors on the people of Ashdod, they get the message and make plans to return the ark to Israel.

It is true that the ark of the covenant was a more potent symbol of God's presence and military might than the vessels, but it is also not clear whether the ark was in existence at the time of Nebuchadnezzar. In any case, the vessels of the temple were capable of serving as symbols of God's presence. Like the Philistines, Belshazzar too promoted his gods at the expense of the true God. He drank toasts to Marduk, Sin, and the others with the goblets reserved for the worship of the only true God. Belshazzar was indeed an idolater—following in the footsteps of his father, who was also an idolater (cf. Dan. 2 and 3).

The repetition of earlier sins does lead us to ask the question: Why is Belshazzar's fate different from that of Nebuchadnezzar? The episode, while not explicitly answering our question, does lead us to an answer as we read the gaps.

Judgment and repentance. We must understand the fate that differentiates Belshazzar in Daniel 5 from Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4. Though a proud man and an idolater, Nebuchadnezzar fares well in the book of Daniel. He is treated with respect by the prophet, and though put in his place, survives to tell about it. Belshazzar, on the other hand, does not fare as well. Indeed, he suffers a humiliating defeat and dies at the hands of his enemies. When the hand begins writing on the wall, Belshazzar's fate is sealed. He is synonymous with God's sure and quick judgment in this book. He offends God; God sentences him. The prophet confronts him with God's sentence of death, and it is immediately carried out.

But what is the difference between Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar? Why does one live and one die? In the final analysis, the answer lies in the sovereign decision of God. Nebuchadnezzar offended God as deeply as Belshazzar, but the prophet was there rooting for him to turn back. When he did, God restored him. Daniel does not hold out hope for Belshazzar; he delivers an unconditional message of judgment. Thus, there is no repentance and no restoration.

In a word, here we have the interplay of divine sovereignty and human responsibility presented in such a way that we cannot easily sort them out. Surely, Belshazzar should have repented, but Daniel, speaking for God, does not give him a chance. Why? Were his sins, for some unexplainable reason, so much greater? Was the example of history, that is, the previous experience of Nebuchadnezzar, sufficient to leave Belshazzar without excuse? The latter has enough of a textual justification to lead us to further exploration.

Hearing the Word of God. Daniel's judgment speech begins with a reminiscence of Nebuchadnezzar (5:18–21). He was proud indeed, but when confronted by God, he acknowledged his subservience to him. In a word, he repented when confronted by God's word and action. In verse 22, Daniel turns his attention to Belshazzar by proclaiming, "But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this." It is the last clause that is telling here—Belshazzar knew what he was supposed to do, but failed to do so. It was not as if this was all new to him.

To be honest, we do not know how Belshazzar knew these things. It could have been the talk of the court for decades afterward. Perhaps the queen mother had talked to him before about Daniel and his God. Whatever the means of communication, Daniel tells us that Belshazzar heard in such a way that he was fully responsible for his present rebellious actions. He had not heeded the warnings, and now he was doomed.

Please notice, however, that even this strong textual clue does not resolve the issue of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Nebuchadnezzar is described as having more than one conversion experience in the preceding chapters. He praises Yahweh at the end of chapter 3 only to find himself rebelling against God in chapter 4, but nonetheless getting a second chance, so to speak. Why does Nebuchadnezzar get a second chance whereas Belshazzar does not even get a first? Again, the ultimate answer is bound up with our understanding of God's sovereignty, as we will see in certain New Testament passages in the next section.

Contemporary Significance

"YOUR DAYS ARE numbered!"

"The handwriting is on the wall!"

These expressions are commonly used in twentieth-century English and are a modern legacy of Daniel 5. They both relate to what we have identified as the unique emphasis of the chapter, which is the awareness of the approach of certain judgment for one's offenses.

Of course, as used today, the expressions often express a belief, not in God, but in the certain hand of fate. Checking the bleak financial papers of a failing institution might elicit such a remark, or perhaps looking at the face of a terminally ill patient approaching the last few days of life. These sentences express the certainty of a bleak end.

In the Bible, of course, it is not fate that writes MENE MENE TEKEL PARSIN on the wall, it is God himself. Our story connects God with a gruesome judgment on a sinful individual. It raises the issue of God's judgment in one's life and beyond.

Where is the judgment of God? To what extent can we look at the failures and deaths of people around us today and say with confidence, "There is the judgment of God"? Does God judge people today as he judged Belshazzar in the story of Daniel 5?

The Germans are defeated in 1945 and Hitler kills himself in a bunker in Berlin. Is this the judgment of God? An atom bomb is dropped on Hiroshima. Is this the judgment of God? An epidemic rips through the gay community. Is this the judgment of God? An abortion clinic is bombed in Atlanta. Is this the judgment of God? A child molester is beaten up in New Jersey. Is this the judgment of God? A country singer's plane crashes off the coast of California. Is this the judgment of God? A Christian missionary dies in Pakistan at a young age. Surely this can't be the judgment of God, can it?

Is there a contrast between an Old Testament God of judgment and condemnation and a New Testament God of grace and mercy? By no means, the New Testament teaches that God, in Jesus, judges evil and condemns the wicked (John 8:26; 12:31). God is still judge in the New Testament (2 Tim. 4:8).²⁸

But there is also clear and strong teaching that God's followers are not in a position to judge others. Perhaps the most well-known teaching in this regard is found in Matthew 7:1–2: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged.

For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." Paul echoes this understanding as he also emphasizes God's role as judge in Romans 2:1–4:

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?

God judges, indeed, but we cannot know with certainty when suffering and death is God's judgment and when it is not. Therefore, we must keep our mouths shut. We must never point to a person who suffers and say, "Behold God's judgment!"

What is the difference between Daniel and us, or for that matter between Daniel's condemnation of Belshazzar and the three friends' condemnation of Job? The difference is that Daniel was a recipient of divine revelation and as a result his words are not his own interpretation of the situation, but rather God's own words. Daniel is a mouthpiece for God's sentence on Belshazzar's life. No one today plays the same role as Daniel did in the Babylonian court. No one today has a direct pipeline to God's mind. Even Paul, in connection with the present status of the Jewish people, could state, "How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" (Rom. 11:33).

As the book of Job teaches, not all suffering is the result of an individual's sin. That was the mistake made by his three friends. They knew that sin had its consequences and godly living had its consequences. Sin led to suffering and righteousness led to success in life. But they believed that that was the whole equation. Thus, if you observed a person suffering, that person must be under God's judgment for his or her sins. The reader knows

better than any of the three friends. Because of the first two chapters, we know with certainty that Job was right in his assertions that he was innocent. He was not suffering for his sins.

Certainly the disciples of Jesus were quick to judge. As they looked at a blind man, they gave the knee-jerk reaction, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). Jesus responded, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned ... but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life" (v. 3).

The disciples' question seems so cruel today. How could they see God's judgment so automatically and dogmatically in this man's blindness? But are we any different today? How many look at a person infected with AIDS and don't even ask the question as they mutter quietly, "The judgment of God." Is this any less cruel or any less deserving of Christ's anger? AIDS is no more or less God's judgment for sins than cancer or the common cold. Of course, they are the result of sin. There would be no disease at all without it, but that a person has AIDS is not the special judgment of God for his or her sins, even if one contracted that disease through intravenous drug use or homosexual activity.

Our role is not to judge. Rather, it is to offer the good news of repentance and restoration. Daniel, a recipient of God's direct revelation, had the authority to withhold the good news of repentance and restoration from Belshazzar, but not so us. Today we do not say to anyone, "You are condemned; you are beyond God's mercy." If we do, we condemn ourselves, because our sin is no better than anyone else's from God's perspective. Note James 2:8–11:

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

If our role is not to judge, then what is it? The world is full of trouble, evil, chaos. What are we to do about it? We are to offer words of life, not condemnation. We are to play the role of Daniel before Nebuchadnezzar, not Daniel before Belshazzar.

Of course, Daniel before Nebuchadnezzar was not morally neutral. God did not direct him to let the king go along his own merry way of rebellion and arrogance. Daniel called him to task, but with a note of deep sadness at the suffering Nebuchadnezzar experienced as well as great hope of restoration.

Neither are we to be morally neutral as we live in a world of injustice, oppression, and licentiousness. We do not seek the destruction of godless people, rather, their redemption. After all, every one of us who today call ourselves Christians were without God. And even after becoming Christians, we still sin. We must never, ever condemn any other person without a full acknowledgment of the darkness of our own hearts and the destructive nature of many of our actions. We must take the log out of our own eyes before we can remove the speck from someone else's (Matt. 7:5).

Unfortunately, I would hazard to guess that the Christian community, in the Western world at least, would be characterized by the watching world as narrow, intolerant, judgmental, and self-righteous rather than forgiving, compassionate, gracious, and redemptive. All of us who call on the name of Christ must do some serious soul-searching and repenting as we reach out to transform the world in our Lord's name.

The sin of blasphemy. The world does need transformation. The arrogance, blasphemy, and idolatry that incarnated in the actions of Belshazzar can be found in abundance in our culture today. Previous chapters have given us the opportunity to describe contemporary manifestations of pride and idolatry, so we will use this section to speak briefly about blasphemy.

Above, we described blasphemy as an act of dishonoring God through speech or actions. Specifically we observed Belshazzar's committing blasphemy through the misuse of objects associated with the worship of God—drinking from the holy temple vessels.

Today, it is true, we have no equivalent to the holy temple vessels. In Old Testament times God chose to make his presence known in special ways in certain locations. These special places—like the tabernacle and the temple

—were symbolic of the great gulf that exists between a holy God and a sinful humanity. It was not possible to gain easy access into the temple. The holy place was supervised by a consecrated people, the priests, and certain rites and rituals, notably sacrifices, had to be observed in order to gain entrance into the presence of God.

In a word, there was a sharp and definite division between the holy and the profane. The temple vessels were associated with a sacred place and therefore were part of the realm of the sacred. Their profane use was therefore an abomination.

What parallels do we have today? At first sight, there appears to be none. After all, with the coming of Christ the division between holy and profane is completely done away with. This fact was anticipated in Zechariah's prophecy in Zechariah 14:20–21:

On that day HOLY TO THE LORD will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, and the cooking pots in the LORD's house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the altar. Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the LORD Almighty, and all who come to sacrifice will take some of the pots and cook in them. And on that day there will no longer be a Canaanite in the house of the LORD Almighty.

Its fulfillment is vividly illustrated by the rending of the temple curtain that separated the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place (Matt. 27:51). Christ's death and resurrection, it appears, moves us into a new era. No longer is anything holy....

Or is it the other way around? Indeed, that is what the Zechariah passage indicates. It is not that there is nothing holy, but that *everything is holy*. This makes sense, does it not, as we consider the difference with the Old Testament era? Whereas before Christ God made his presence known in a special way in a certain location, today we can meet God anywhere—in a church, a street, a car, our homes, a bar.

Such an understanding intensifies the concept of blasphemy. Blasphemy is not just defacing a church or a cross. It is a misuse of any part of God's

creation. An assault against a fellow human being is an act of blasphemy. After all, we are all created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27; James 3:9). An angry word spoken against a fellow believer is an act of blasphemy. After all, Christians are all temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16). The destruction of the environment for selfish purposes is an act of blasphemy. The land, the air, the seas are each the creation of our holy God.

Again, when we fully understand blasphemy, we are staggered by the extent to which each and every one of us is implicated. The implication, however, should not come as a surprise. Like Belshazzar we "know all this." Belshazzar knew from the example of his great predecessor Nebuchadnezzar. But where have we been told?

The world today is far better informed than in the days of Belshazzar. We have been warned and given clear directions about a proper relationship with God. God himself has given the people of the world a direct message through his Word.

This is a major component of the teaching of the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19–31). The parable presents the plight of an unnamed rich man, suffering for his sins in hell. Lazarus, a beggar who suffered in life, was enjoying the afterlife in heaven. In response to the rich man's request, Abraham does not allow Lazarus to slake his thirst. The rich man's suffering incites him to beseech Abraham to allow Lazarus to go warn his still living brothers of the coming judgment. The ensuing interchange between Abraham and the rich man is revealing (Luke 16:29–31):

Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them."

"No, father Abraham," he said, "but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent."

He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

The message to the rich man concerning his brothers is essentially the same as Daniel's to Belshazzar: "They should have known!" They have the

Word of God at their fingertips. They need to read and respond. And, of course, the message of the parable goes beyond the rich man and his brothers to us today. We should know.... We have no excuse.

However, we do not have to look too far to see contemporary misuses of God's Word that look eerily similar to Belshazzar's profanation of the holy vessels. Not everyone who practices a postmodern approach to the Bible is guilty of profanation; indeed, Christian scholars need to think through the implications of postmodernism for reading the Bible.²⁹ Most exegesis, whether by evangelicals or others, simply operate with a modern-scientific worldview that is no more biblical than a postmodern one. However, it is wrong simply to assume the validity of the culture that we happen to live in without submitting it to a biblical critique.³⁰ Unfortunately, there are too many examples of the reverse, submitting the Bible to a postmodern critique.

One glaring example may be found in a recent interpretation of Psalm 24.31 This essay's purpose is to demonstrate an approach to the text as well as to discuss Psalm 24. The author proclaims the postmodern dictum that texts have no determinate meaning. There is no presence, divine or authorial, to rein in our interpretation. We, as readers, can ascribe whatever meaning we like to the text. He promotes the idea that biblical interpreters should simply cut the cloth of the text to fit the needs of the audience who is paying for our skills. Nonetheless, with a move that seems to fit uneasily with his idea that the text itself has no meaning, he argues that Psalm 24 presents a view of God and war that he finds repulsive and argues that we must read "against the grain" of the apparent meaning of this text. Belshazzar takes the holy vessels of God and mocks God by drinking and toasting his idols; is Clines's treatment of the Bible far removed from this act?

Daniel 6:1-28

¹IT PLEASED DARIUS to appoint 120 satraps to rule throughout the kingdom, ²with three administrators over them, one of whom was Daniel. The satraps were made accountable to them so that the king might not suffer loss. ³Now Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators and the satraps by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom. ⁴At this, the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent. ⁵Finally these men said, "We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God."

⁶So the administrators and the satraps went as a group to the king and said: "O King Darius, live forever! ⁷The royal administrators, prefects, satraps, advisers and governors have all agreed that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or man during the next thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into the lions' den. ⁸Now, O king, issue the decree and put it in writing so that it cannot be altered—in accordance with the laws of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed." ⁹So King Darius put the decree in writing.

¹⁰Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.

¹¹Then these men went as a group and found Daniel praying and asking God for help. ¹²So they went to the king and spoke to him about his royal decree: "Did you not publish a decree that during the next thirty days anyone who prays to any god or man except to you, O king, would be thrown into the lions' den?"

The king answered, "The decree stands—in accordance with the laws of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed."

¹³Then they said to the king, "Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or to the decree you put in writing. He still prays three times a day." ¹⁴When the king heard this, he was greatly distressed; he was determined to rescue Daniel and made every effort until sundown to save him.

¹⁵Then the men went as a group to the king and said to him, "Remember, O king, that according to the law of the Medes and Persians no decree or edict that the king issues can be changed."

¹⁶So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions' den. The king said to Daniel, "May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!"

¹⁷A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles, so that Daniel's situation might not be changed. ¹⁸Then the king returned to his palace and spent the night without eating and without any entertainment being brought to him. And he could not sleep.

¹⁹At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions' den. ²⁰When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God,

whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?"

²¹Daniel answered, "O king, live forever! ²²My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, O king."

²³The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the den. And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.

²⁴At the king's command, the men who had falsely accused Daniel were brought in and thrown into the lions' den, along with their wives and children. And before they reached the floor of the den, the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones.

²⁵Then King Darius wrote to all the peoples, nations and men of every language throughout the land:

"May you prosper greatly!

²⁶"I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel.

"For he is the living God and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end.

27He rescues and he saves; he performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth. He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions."

²⁸So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian.

Original Meaning

DANIEL 6 BRINGS to a close the stories concerning Daniel's activities in the foreign court. He has not changed location; he is still in the city of Babylon. However, a new empire rules the roost as Persia has replaced Babylon. Belshazzar is dead and Darius the Mede is in control.

The identity of Darius the Mede is a vexing question. This commentary is not the place for an extended discussion, but we will present the problem in its broad outlines. In brief, Cyrus was the king of Persia at the time of the fall of Babylon. No Darius is mentioned in the tablets from this time period. We begin by reminding the reader of the situation just a century ago with Belshazzar. At that time, no figure named Belshazzar was associated with the end of Babylonian history. Now, however, he is a well-documented person (see comments on ch. 5).

Darius is a well-known Persian royal name but not until long after the death of Cyrus and the rule of Cyrus's son Cambyses. Darius I (522–486 B.C.) was the king who instituted a system whereby his far-flung empire was ruled by twenty satraps. Because Darius I is associated with the institution of a new system of satrapies, many scholars feel that Daniel, writing later (see Introduction), confused Darius I with the conqueror of Babylon. However, this type of confusion seems extraordinary even at a remove of several centuries. It is more likely that Darius is a throne name for someone ruling in Babylon at the behest of Cyrus.

Recent scholars have attempted to associate Darius the Mede with particular individuals whom we know played important roles at the time Persia incorporated Babylon into its empire. J. Whitcomb has argued that Darius the Mede is actually Gubaru, known from the Akkadian texts as governor of Babylon.² The eminent Assyriologist D. J. Wiseman, on the other hand, has argued that Darius the Mede is the Babylonian throne name of none other than Cyrus himself.³ Perhaps the most persuasive of all attempts at identification is that of W. Shea: Darius the Mede is Gu/Ugbaru, the general to whom the Nabonidus Chronicle attributes the conquest of Babylon.⁴ He would be ruling as a sub-king at the whim of the ultimate ruler, Cyrus himself.

Short of a document identifying one of these figures as Darius, we cannot be certain. The identification of Darius the Mede is an important problem

for those of us who believe that Daniel gives us accurate historical information, but it does not affect our interpretation. Harmonizations are possible, as we have seen from the suggestions of Whitcomb, Wiseman, and Shea, but not provable. With this brief explanation for those who are troubled by the issue, we pass on now to a consideration of the content of the passage.

The story is easily identified as a court narrative of conflict.⁵ The plot is propelled by the jealousy that Daniel's peers and subordinates in the Persian government feel toward his rapid rise to the top of the political hierarchy. They seek to undermine his position by pitting his loyalty to God over against his loyalty to the Persian government, which he serves. Boogaart is correct to see the conflict ultimately as one between two empires:

On the one hand we have Darius, ruler of all the peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth (cf. verse 25) and enforcer of the law of the Medes and Persians. On the other hand we have the God of Daniel, working signs and wonders in heaven and on earth (cf. verse 27) and enforcer of Jewish law (cf. verse 5). The kingdoms overlap and the question of sovereignty has to be resolved.⁶

As the chapter explores this conflict, it again emphasizes the overarching theme of the whole book: *In spite of present appearances God is in control*. God will be victorious over the seemingly powerful forces ranged against him and his people. Thus, this story, like those that preceded it, provides comfort for God's people, who find themselves in situations that seem beyond their control.

Daniel 6 finds its closest parallel with Daniel 3. Notice, though, a subtle difference that makes Daniel 6 more than a mere repetition. While the story of the three friends of Daniel in the fiery furnace shows how the faithful refuse to participate in idolatrous religious practices, the present chapter shows how they refuse to refrain from proper worship of God. Daniel is told not to pray to Yahweh, but he does so nonetheless. Daniel obeys God's law, not the immutable law of the Medes and Persians.

The chapter may be divided into four parts: (1) the plot against Daniel (6:1–9); (2) the trap and reluctant punishment (6:10–18); (3) Daniel's rescue and the accusers' demise (6:19–24); (4) Darius's decree (6:25–28).

The Plot Against Daniel (6:1–9)

THE STORY OPENS with the new king setting up his personal form of government for Babylonia. Over him is Cyrus, the king of Persia, so we are to understand this story as concerned only with Babylonia. While it is true that at a later date Darius will divide the entire empire into twenty satrapies, the present division involved much smaller units. Darius thus pushes the governance of Babylonia in the direction of decentralization, which may help explain his later quick acceptance of the proposal to make him the chief mediator of prayer. In other words, this suggestion assures him of his continued central place in the government while at the same time delegating authority to others.

By now, we are not surprised that Daniel distinguishes himself from all the other authorities whom Darius has placed in important positions throughout his kingdom. After all, we already know he is the wisest of the wise and the most capable of everyone in the land. The king's intention to promote him above everyone else is apparently leaked to the others, who for obviously selfish reasons want to block his swift rise. Unfortunately for them, Daniel's behavior conforms to his spotless reputation. They will have to manufacture a fault in his personality.

Their twisted minds come up with the ideal plan. They know that Daniel's religion is the fundamental guiding principle of his life. He would betray the king before he would betray his religion. Thus they lay their trap to trip him up.

Their approach to the king is a masterpiece of political deception to achieve their illicit ends. The Aramaic verb (rgs) behind the NIV translation "went as a group" (v. 6) is ambiguous as to their attitude. As Fewell explains, the word has a semantic range that moves from "the rather innocent connotation of 'in company,' to the idea of 'conspiracy,' to the notion of 'rage." She rightly believes that all senses of the word echo in the context. She also describes how this verb's combination with the preposition 'al can also be interpreted in different senses from the point of view of the king himself, who thinks they are making a fuss "over" him, or

from the vantage point of the conspirators themselves, who are actually working "against" him.¹⁰

In any case, these "administrators and satraps" are clearly lying to the king, since they claim that the proposal they are presenting has been unanimously approved by all of his subordinates. Of course, Daniel, the king's favorite, does not even know about it.

The proposal itself is strange. It definitely appeals to the vanity of the king, especially if the king is feeling any insecurity about his popularity or power. Perhaps this explains his ready acceptance of such a bizarre suggestion. On the surface, it appears to suggest to the king that he be sole deity of the realm for thirty days. While it is easy to imagine someone's overweening pride allowing him to believe he is a god, it is hard to see someone putting such a short time period on his divinity.

Questions like this have led John Walton to make the plausible suggestion that the decree does not actually "deify the king but designates him as the only legitimate representative of deity for the stated time." Whichever it is, Daniel will find himself in an impossible situation from a human point of view, for the decree may not be repealed according to the custom of the Persians and Medes. 12

The Trap and Reluctant Punishment (6:10–18)

THE NARRATIVE NOW shifts scene. We move from the court to Daniel's home where he hears of the king's decree to forbid prayer toward anything or anyone but the king himself. His response is simple: He goes upstairs and prays with the windows open toward Jerusalem. There is no speech or inner turmoil recorded in the narrative. The impression the narrative intends to impart is Daniel's unflinching obedience. He does not question, doubt, or worry; he acts. He does not bow toward Darius, but toward Jerusalem. Darius is neither the object nor the mediator of his prayers. That role is taken by Yahweh.

Why does Daniel bow toward Jerusalem? Essentially, his act is motivated by 1 Kings 8:35–36 (italics added):

When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because your people have sinned against you, and when they pray toward this place and confess your name and turn from their sin because you have afflicted them, then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your servants, your people Israel. Teach them the right way to live, and send rain on the land you gave your people for an inheritance.

The context of these verses is Solomon's prayer of dedication of the temple in Jerusalem. God had made his presence known in a special way in the temple. As Solomon made clear, the temple did not contain God, but was the place God himself chose as the place where his people would come to worship him.

Of course, at the time of Daniel's prayer the temple was in ruins. God had abandoned his earthly home (Ezek. 9–11) because of the presumption of the people (Jer. 7) and had allowed the Babylonians to tear down the temple (book of Lamentations). Nonetheless, Judeans in exile, such as Daniel, turned regularly to the city with longing in their hearts and hope for the future.

According to the passage, Daniel did this three times a day. This practice is not mandated anywhere in Scripture, but is perhaps suggested by passages such as Psalm 55:17:¹³

Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice.

The mention of the "three times a day" indicates that Daniel's prayer on this occasion is not stirred on by the decree; it is part of his regular habit. He is not flaunting his rebellion in the face of the king's orders; it is business as usual. Indeed, the description of his prayer is a statement that he is neither flaunting nor hiding his religious practice. After all, he is praying in an upper room, and with the windows open. He is not on public display, but neither is he hiding from determined spies.

And determined spies there were. The officials who precipitated the crisis see Daniel's actions and report them to the king (vv. 12, 15). As we have

seen above (cf. comments on v. 6), the verb used is *rgs*, indicating not only that they act as a group but also with malicious intent. From their description, we learn something of the content of Daniel's prayer. He is "asking God for help" (v. 11). Likely, he is turning to God for aid because he anticipates trouble from the decree. As the story continues, we discover how God answers his prayer.

The conspirators present news of Daniel's actions craftily. They know where the king's sympathies lie, so before they accuse Daniel, they remind the king of his earlier decision and its binding character. They then confront the king with the news that indicts Daniel.

The king reacts with extreme dismay. The contrast with Nebuchadnezzar's reaction to the three friends in Daniel 3 could not be stronger. While the latter responded with increasing anger to the friends' refusal to participate in the pagan rite, Darius wants to save the aged Judean counselor. However, he is trapped by his own unchangeable words and must carry out the punishment.

"So the king gave the order" (v. 16). As decreed, Daniel is thrown into the lions' den. No comparable form of punishment is known from the ancient Near East, but then powerful yet insecure nations from time immemorial have devised tortures and deaths with incredible imagination. The conception is simple enough: Develop a pit and put lions in it. The victim, in this case Daniel, could be thrown in; a stone blocked the point of entry, and the lions would be allowed to do their work. Since the punishment in this case is the execution of a royal decree, the king seals the entrance with his seal. This act does not lock the door as much as prevent tampering with it. If someone were to open the door before the next morning, it would be noticed because the seal would be broken.

The king's concern for Daniel continues through the night. He cannot eat or sleep. As he discovers the next morning to his surprise, his evening has been much more difficult than Daniel's!

Daniel's Rescue and the Accusers' Demise (6:19–24)

THE COMING DAWN finds Darius rushing to the lions' den in order to discover the fate of Daniel. Contrary to some interpreters, ¹⁴ Darius must have had at least a glimmer of hope that Daniel would survive the night.

After all, he had commended Daniel into the hands of the prophet's God and called out to him the moment he reached the den.

Perhaps it is best to consider the lions' den a trial by ordeal rather than an execution per se. An execution, after all, would not have a time limit. The understanding of the scene as an ordeal also explains some of the language found in the chapter. What was an ordeal? An individual was subjected to an ordeal when he was suspected of a crime, but there was some uncertainty as to his guilt. Daniel's guilt in relationship to Darius's decree appears clear, but as he emerges from the den, he claims that the lions have not hurt him "because I was found innocent in [God's] sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, O king" (v. 22). Daniel's survival attests to his innocence.

Ordeals are broadly known in the ancient Near East.¹⁵ They take many forms, but perhaps the most well known is the water ordeal. An individual suspected of a crime is thrown into a river. If he or she dies, they are guilty. But if they survive, they are innocent and set free. Biblical law contains only one possible instance of ordeal: the case of a woman suspected of adultery (Num. 5:11–31).¹⁶

The theology behind an ordeal is that God, who knows the heart in a way that human judges do not, will see the verdict through. Daniel's survival, then, is God's judgment of innocence on Daniel. In this judgment, Darius rejoices.

Daniel further attests to God's involvement in his survival when he informs Darius that during the night God sent his angel to shut the mouths of the lions. The angel plays the same role as the "fourth man" in the blazing furnace in Daniel 3. Furthermore, just as the three friends do not even have the smell of smoke on their clothes as they are brought out of the furnace, so Daniel doesn't have a scratch on his body when he is lifted out of the den, even though he spent the night with lions.

But perhaps the lions weren't hungry that night. Or perhaps someone sympathetic to Daniel, say Darius, had had the lions fed to the full or even drugged beforehand. Any such doubts are dispelled in the following verses when Daniel's accusers and their families are thrown into the den. The viciousness and hunger of the lions are vividly displayed by the fact they were attacked and killed before "they reached the floor of the den" (v. 24).

The accusers set a trap for Daniel, but in the end they were caught in their own trap—and not only the accusers themselves, but also their families. Modern commentators, for obvious reasons, have felt uncomfortable imagining the prophet standing by as wives and children are thrown into the den. Moreover, even though it was the Persian king's decision (after all, those children might well grow up with ideas of revenge in mind), the narrator seems to have taken some pleasure in the scene. We must remember, however, that this scene is presented to a generation of God's people who felt helpless in the grips of their oppressors. Their own families were impotent in the face of exploitation and worse. They were daily being manipulated for purposes other than their own.

Darius's Decree (6:25–28)

THE PLOT OF Daniel 6 was set in motion by Darius's issuing a decree that prayers could only be directed toward himself either as a divine figure or, as is more likely, the only mediator with the divine realm. The chapter ends with a second decree, this time promoting Daniel's God throughout his vast empire.

Has the thirty-day period of the first decree passed? If not, how could that unchangeable law be changed and replaced with this one? We cannot answer that question with certainty since we do not know the timing. In any case, God takes the place of Darius, at Darius's own urging, at the end of the chapter. What a wonderful testimony to the people of God that God truly is in control in spite of present appearances!

Darius proclaims the God of Daniel "the living God." This indicates that he not only exists, but is active in the world. Certainly the prophet's rescue shows that in a dramatic fashion. God and his kingdom will never end, and he rescues his people in astounding ways. Specifically, his rescue of Daniel from the lions' den demonstrates that "he rescues and he saves" (v. 27).

After Darius's speech, the chapter, which brings to a close the court narrative part of the book, concludes with the narrative statement that "Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian" (v. 28). Indeed he did. He prospered throughout his entire lifetime in the court. Fewell summarizes his progression well:

We have seen the Hebrew sage climb the political ladder from captive prisoner to initiate to sage (ch. 1) to chief sage (ch. 2) to administrator over the province of Babylon (chs. 2–3) to the king's personal adviser (ch. 4) to third ruler in the kingdom (ch. 5) to the prime minister that the king himself intends, at the beginning of ch. 6, to set over the entire kingdom and does implicitly set over the kingdom at the end of ch. 6.¹⁷

Though the story of Daniel's political career thus draws to a close, even more exciting material follows in the second half of the book.

Bridging Contexts

Daniel 6 is the last of six historical narratives featuring Daniel in a foreign court. Thus, we have already had ample opportunity to spell out the hermeneutical principles that allow us to move from the original context of the story to a contemporary setting. We have argued as early as chapter 1¹⁸ that the historical narrative of the Old Testament was written not simply for remembrance, but also to serve as a paradigm for future behavior. The narratives of Daniel, in particular, are shaped to serve as life examples for later generations of God's people.

We have also confronted the issue of bringing this Old Testament text to bear on a New Testament audience. Acknowledging Christ's climactic role in the history of God's story of redemption leads modern interpreters to recognize the possibility of discontinuity as well as continuity between ourselves and the ancient audience. We have also seen how Jesus himself instructed his followers to read the Old Testament in the light of his coming (Luke 24:25–27, 44). We will keep these principles in mind as we work through the contents of Daniel 6.

Basic truths repeated. Although I do not want to be overly repetitive, I must nonetheless point out that Daniel 6, like the preceding five chapters, illustrates the basic themes of the book of Daniel. Despite present appearances, God is indeed in control. Regardless of the fact that powerful political forces move against Daniel, God preserves him from their clutches. In spite of the fact that the law of the Medes and Persians has

condemned him to death, God preserves his life. Regardless of the fact that the lions are hungry, God does not allow them to even scratch Daniel's skin. God indeed is in control!

But Daniel not only survives in spite of his faith; he prospers. At the beginning of the chapter, he already has a position of great importance in Darius's court. The plot against him was motivated by the other leaders' jealousy of his power. As the chapter ends, the narrator drives this point home with the comment: "So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian" (6:28). What an example and encouragement to God's people, who later faced similar threats and challenges! The basic message of this chapter to later readers is simple: "Remain faithful! God will take care of you."

Of course, the threats and obstacles in life can be incredibly imposing. Daniel and his three friends have already testified to that truth. In Daniel 6, we have a story where the faith of Daniel alone is tested. In many ways, this chapter parallels Daniel 3, which recorded the depth of the three friends' faith, with no mention of Daniel. Here we have Daniel without the three friends. The text does not allow us any basis to speculate concerning the whereabouts or actions of the three friends here, any more than we could be certain about Daniel's absence from the earlier story.

The conflict of laws. The focus on Daniel, of course, results from the fact that he has drawn the envy of his colleagues because of his meteoric rise in Darius's estimation. They cannot find anything in his behavior or character to use in order to undermine his position, so they resort to framing him. They manipulate the king to create a law that they know Daniel will not keep. The law prohibits prayer to any god or human except Darius himself for a period of thirty days. Whether the law sets Darius on a divine pedestal or imagines him to be the conduit to the gods is irrelevant; in either case, the surface intention of the law is to create a means by which extreme loyalty to the king can be measured. The irony of the situation is that the administrators who urged the king to create this law were actually disloyal to Darius, working against his own desires and intentions, whereas Daniel, who finds himself under judgment of the law, is actually the most true of his subordinates.

Nonetheless, the law created by Darius became one of the "laws of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed" (v. 8). The irony here is that

the law cannot even be repealed by the king himself! A law that has as its ostensible purpose the intention to set the king up as an ultimate authority actually imprisons him to its own authority.

Even more significantly, it brings the king and his law into a fundamental conflict with God and his law. Daniel knows that God's law requires that he pray to the ultimate authority of the universe, not to a human king. The basic tension in Daniel 6 is the conflict between God's law and the law of the Medes and Persians. Daniel must choose between the two laws, and he does not hesitate for a moment. He chooses to obey God's law.

Before continuing, we should note the difference between God's relationship with his law and Darius's relationship with his. The law in both cases reflects the will and desires of the one who creates the law. Darius's law reflects what he wants, and God's law reflects what God wants. We have seen, however, that Darius's law ultimately binds him to a course of action he did not want. When he saw the consequences of his actions, he would have loved to change his mind, but he could not. He was not above the law.

Is God above his law? This is a difficult question. In one sense, we want to say, yes. God is above everything. He is not bound by his own laws. He can do whatever he wants. However, to go down that road is misleading and wrong. As opposed to Darius's relationship to the law he creates, God's law is always the perfect expression of his character. The difference between Darius and God is that the latter knows himself perfectly and knows the consequences of his acts and pronouncements perfectly. This is why the psalmist in Psalm 19:7–11 can speak of God's law in a way that would be illegitimate about any human law:

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul.

The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple.

The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart.

The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

The fear of the LORD is pure,

enduring forever.

The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous.

They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb.

By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

The cost of discipleship. Daniel kept the law of the Lord, but at first it did not seem like reward would be the result of his obedience. Darius, bound by his own law, threw him into the lions' den. Daniel's obedience flowed from his realization that he would sin if he did not practice his own religion. In this way, it is the flip side of Daniel 3, where the three friends illustrated the realization that they would sin if they participated in the false religious practices of their idolatrous oppressors. The two chapters together thus encourage later readers to avoid false religion and to pursue legitimate religion, no matter what the cost.

And the cost was great. Daniel does not articulate it as blatantly as the three friends in their speech before Nebuchadnezzar, but we are surely to understand Daniel's attitude to affirm the belief that "the God we serve is able to save us from it [the death penalty], and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods ..." (3:17–18; or in the case of Daniel, he will not desist from worshiping his God). In a word, Daniel would rather be eaten by lions than stop praying to God.

Even so, notice the quiet faithfulness of Daniel. Here we revisit a theme encountered for the first time in chapter 1. Daniel does not grandstand for the faith, but neither does he try to hide his love of the Lord. He did not go to the public square or the court to flaunt his rejection of Darius's decree; rather, he went as usual to his "upstairs room" (v. 10). Yet he did not close the windows so no one could observe his prayers. It may take some effort, like that exerted by the conspirators, but Daniel was not taking any extraordinary measures to hide his lack of compliance to Darius's decree.

No, he will obey the law of God, not the law of the Medes and Persians with which it conflicts.

For his obedience, he is condemned to the lions' den. Again, Darius's law no longer reflects the king's will, but he has no other choice. In the world in which he lives and helped to create, not even the king can circumvent the law. He can hope, but he cannot stop the wheels that he set in motion.

God's redemptive power. In other words, Darius, the most powerful human being in the world, has no power to save Daniel. But Daniel's faith is founded on a person who is more powerful than the king, God himself. As events unfold, we observe another important biblical theme in operation: God overrules the evil intentions of human beings to bring about great salvation.

God is not only not bound by his own law as Darius is; he can deliver his people from the evil intentions of their enemies. We have seen this important redemptive principle at work frequently in previous Scripture, but I will only use one story to illustrate it. In previous chapters we had occasion to note similarities between Daniel and Joseph. As we read the Joseph story with this principle in mind, we see again and again how God delivered him from the evil intentions of human beings. Jealous brothers wanted him dead, so they threw him in a pit. God saved Joseph from death at that point when they saw an opportunity to turn their rage into a commercial venture by selling him into slavery to the Midianites. He ended up in Egypt, where he distinguished himself in the service of the high Egyptian official Potiphar.

There, however, he eventually ran into trouble because of the evil intentions of Potiphar's wife, who framed him for attempted rape. Joseph ended up in jail. This is where he met two other high Egyptian officials, the chief baker and the chief cupbearer, whose acquaintance ultimately brought him into contact with the pharaoh himself. His new high office placed him in a position from which he could save his family from certain death by starvation during an intense famine.

Joseph's was no ordinary family. It was the seed of the promise, the promise given to Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3. Joseph himself articulated the principle we are applying to the story in Daniel 6. After the death of Jacob, Joseph's brothers thought the time of their punishment for mistreating their now powerful brother had come. In response to their pleas

for mercy, however, Joseph expressed his certainty concerning God's purposes in his suffering over the years: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen. 50:20).

In this story in Daniel, God overruled the evil intentions of the conspirators and the powerlessness of Darius in order to illustrate to countless generations of his people that he is able to save his people in the midst of the most dire circumstances. We must ask what we face that surpasses the danger Daniel faced. Moreover, as we will see, we have a much stronger basis for faith in the midst of suffering and the threat of death than Daniel did.

To take it one step further, just as God saves, he also judges. Daniel lived through the night with the hungry lions. But the next morning the conspirators meet the fate they had planned for Daniel. The lions weren't sleepy or full during the night, for the bodies of the enemies of God's people did not even hit the ground before they were gobbled up. Daniel 6 thus illustrates the principle expressed in Proverbs 28:10:20

He who leads the upright along an evil path will fall into his own trap, but the blameless will receive a good inheritance.

Thus, Daniel 6 ends with Daniel alive and promoted and his enemies dead. To cap it all off, Darius celebrates Daniel's rescue by giving praise to an authority and a kingdom greater than his own. His decree in verses 26–27 is an implicit admission that his own power is limited, while the "living God" and his kingdom is above all.

Contemporary Significance

IN DANIEL 6, God calls his followers to persist in faithfulness in spite of opposition and the threat of death. He shows himself able to take care of his people in the most dire of circumstances. Daniel, his faithful servant, not only survives the lion ordeal, but he prospers to the end in the foreign court. Hebrews 11:33–34 alludes to this episode as a prime example of faith and

its results. Today, Daniel is presented to us as an example of faith under duress.

Further, though Daniel 6 is not cited, surely our chapter helped provide justification for the behavior of Peter and the other apostles in Acts 5. They had just been imprisoned on the charge of preaching the gospel in Jerusalem. What do they do immediately upon their release? They preach again. When confronted, they respond, "We must obey God rather than men!" (Acts 5:29). Whether it is the law of God versus the law of the Medes and Persians, or versus the law of the Sanhedrin—or the law of the Romans, or the laws of the United States of America—God's faithful followers must always side with God's law.

Americans and most other Western Christians are spoiled, however. The democracies in which we live allow considerable room for the free exercise of religion. We may openly go to church, form our own schools, raise our children in our beliefs. If our religious conscience compels us, we can plead our case for noninvolvement in the military. We can openly protest trends in our society that are opposed to our religious values.

Private versus public situations. At times, however, Western Christians misapply the examples of Daniel and Peter. A prime example is the complaint about the lack of prayer in our public schools. Our present law prohibits a teacher from offering a prayer in our state-run schools. This bothers some Christians, who believe that Daniel 6 provides the motivation for objection. They argue that Daniel was told he could not pray, but he persisted in prayer. If we, then, are told we cannot pray, we must not cave in to the "law of the Medes and Persians." A similar kind of argument is presented in the analogous cases of Christmas displays on government property or the hanging of the Ten Commandments in a judge's courtroom.

But are these situations really analogous to Daniel 6? I suggest they are not. Daniel was not prohibited from praying in a certain location like the court; he was forbidden to pray to God at all, even in private! Indeed, it is preposterous to even imagine Daniel during his early years in Babylon insisting on prayer before the opening of his Akkadian class or the class on divination.

The confusion in the United States and probably other Western democracies arises because some Christians insist that their country is the modern equivalent of Israel. However, it cannot be urged too strongly that there are and can be no modern equivalents of Israel. There is no such thing as a "Christian nation," except in the sense of a nation where most of the inhabitants happen to be Christian at that particular historical moment.

In other words, the nation is not the church. The modern equivalent of Israel is not a political entity but rather the church. Christians should be working to keep prayer out of public schools, manger scenes off the front yard of city hall, and the Ten Commandments out of the local magistrates' offices. When the church has state backing, it grows complacent, or even worse, coercive in its witness. Indeed, study has shown that when the church gets an entrée into the power structures of the state (whether the government per se or public educational institutions), it has hurt, not helped, the cause of the kingdom. I believe we can see this in a country like Korea, where the church exercises enormous influence on the public sector and also has significant wealth and power. The power struggles within Korean ecclesiastical structures are notorious. No, the quiet faithfulness of Daniel in the privacy of his upper room has nothing to do with trying to practice public prayer in a state-run institution.

The modern parallels to Daniel 6 in Western democracies take place not in the arena of culture wars, but rather in more local situations. A librarian is fired because she refuses to work on a Sunday morning during worship services. A young teenager is told by his parents that he may not meet with the neighborhood church's youth group for prayer because they do not want him involved in "all that superstition." A wife is told that she can be a Christian, but must not act like it around the house. Where we today most often encounter conflict analogous to Daniel 6 is the law of God versus the law of an employer, a parent, a spouse.

Preparation and vigilance. Western Christians, however, must be vigilant. Their present freedom of religion could change over time. To be vigilant, however, does not mean to prepare for war or to fight for our rights. Again, the example of Daniel 6, as well as that of the disciples in the New Testament, not to speak of Jesus himself, is to prepare to risk all, even our lives. When Daniel heard about the law forbidding his prayer, he did not rally the troops for a strike or armed resistance, he prepared himself for death. The same may be said concerning the three friends in Daniel 3. Christians do not fight for their beliefs by assaulting or killing, but by dying.

The principle for this attitude comes from the Bible. We get stirring examples of this principle as it is worked on in the lives of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, Peter, and many others in the pages of Scripture. But we also see examples today in the lives and deaths of our brothers and sisters who live in more coercive societies. Let me share with you the story of one of my students and his wife, Bob and Heidi Fu.

When Bob was a non-Christian, he was a leader in the protest in Tiananmen Square, which resulted in a massacre on June 4, 1989. After the protest, he became the object of intense scrutiny by the Public Security Bureau Police, but what really devastated him were betrayals by several of his colleagues. In his own words, Bob said he felt like "there was no hope, no future."

At this critical juncture in his life, one of his fellow students passed him the biography of Mr. Xi Xiong Mo, a former drug addict who converted to Christianity. Bob and his wife became Christians in that fateful year of 1989. God used them and others so that a number of his fellow students became Christians as well. Bob soon found he was again the object of the attention of the Communist Party, but now for a different reason—his Christian faith and ministry. He and his wife were both arrested in 1996 and spent two months in a Chinese jail, where they were viciously interrogated and lived in horrible conditions, but their faith grew strong.

They were suddenly released from prison, but told they could be reincarcerated at any time. Bob speculates they were released in order to see who else was in their movement. Around the same time, Heidi got pregnant without obtaining the necessary quota approval slip from the police. Rearrest and forced abortion were a real possibility in her life, so they fled from Beijing to Hong Kong and finally, after being interviewed on *ABC World News Tonight*, got the attention of influential people in the United States, resulting in permission to seek asylum here.²¹

Where did Daniel find the courage to face the lions' den? His courage came from his faith in "the living God." As we saw in the previous section, this God is a God who can overrule evil to bring about good, to bring salvation. Where did Bob and Heidi Fu and countless other Christians who have faced imprisonment and death for their faith find courage to persevere? They, and we, have an even stronger basis for our faith than Daniel. Why? Because since the time of Daniel, the hope of Israel has

come. Jesus Christ himself has fulfilled the prophetic anticipation of a suffering and raised Savior. The Messiah is no longer a hope for the future, but a hope based on a past event. We do not look forward to the incarnation of God's Son, but we look back to the cross.

As we look back to the cross, we see that Jesus himself faced the same threat as Daniel in the lions' den. As early Christian art attests,²² Daniel's emergence from the lions' den is typological of Jesus death and resurrection. Towner and Goldingay explain the comparison most clearly among modern commentators.²³ As Daniel was framed on a false charge by the Persian administrators, so Jesus was framed by the jealous religious leaders of his day. They reported to the Roman authorities that he was claiming political authority with the title "king of the Jews" (Matt. 27:11). Jesus, like Daniel, was arrested while at prayer in a private location, the Garden of Gethsemane. Pilate, like Darius, worked for his release. But in the end, both Daniel and Jesus are turned over to be executed. As Towner emphasizes, however, the big difference between the two is that Daniel emerges without a scratch, while Jesus dies. Yet that difference is what underlines the superiority of the reality to its foreshadow. Jesus dies, yet he emerges from the tomb!

We have noted how Daniel in the lions' den demonstrates God's ability to overrule the evil intentions of men and women in order to bring about something good. With Joseph, we observed that God overruled the evil intentions of those who persecuted him to bring about salvation. Peter understands the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the ultimate fulfillment of this principle when he preaches at Pentecost (Acts 2:22–24):

Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

Now we can see the power that allows us to risk all for our faith. Jesus has not only gone into the lions' den and emerged unscathed, but he has died and been raised again. And, as Paul reminds us, his death and resurrection are the "firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 15:20). Because of Jesus, death cannot hold us either. "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (15:54–56).

Our faith gives us the courage to risk all, even death. Christians living in the West have not been tested to risk all. Often we act as if we are unwilling to risk anything. We need to pray for our brothers and sisters who today risk much, and we must ask the Lord to make us ready when our day of testing comes.

Our willingness to risk even our lives is what will turn the heads of the secular culture that surrounds us. Our complaints, our legislative efforts, our attempts to compel people to live according to our standards of morality will only close their ears. The power of quiet faithfulness is impressed upon us in the closing words of Darius in Dan. 6:26–27:

For he is the living God
and he endures forever;
his kingdom will not be destroyed,
his dominion will never end.
He rescues and he saves;
he performs signs and wonders
in the heavens and on the earth.
He has rescued Daniel
from the power of the lions.

Daniel 7:1-28

¹In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel had a dream, and visions passed through his mind as he was lying on his bed. He wrote down the substance of his dream.

²Daniel said: "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me were the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea. ³Four great beasts, each different from the others, came up out of the sea.

4"The first was like a lion, and it had the wings of an eagle. I watched until its wings were torn off and it was lifted from the ground so that it stood on two feet like a man, and the heart of a man was given to it.

5"And there before me was a second beast, which looked like a bear. It was raised up on one of its sides, and it had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. It was told, 'Get up and eat your fill of flesh!'

6"After that, I looked, and there before me was another beast, one that looked like a leopard. And on its back it had four wings like those of a bird. This beast had four heads, and it was given authority to rule.

⁷"After that, in my vision at night I looked, and there before me was a fourth beast—terrifying and frightening and very powerful. It had large iron teeth; it crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. It was different from all the former beasts, and it had ten horns.

8"While I was thinking about the horns, there before me was another horn, a little one, which came up among them; and three of the first horns were uprooted before it. This horn had eyes like the eyes of a man and a mouth that spoke boastfully.

⁹"As I looked,

"thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool.

His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze.

¹⁰A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him.

Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.

The court was seated, and the books were opened.

¹¹"Then I continued to watch because of the boastful words the horn was speaking. I kept looking until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire. ¹²(The other beasts had been stripped of their authority, but were allowed to live for a period of time.)

13"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

¹⁵"I, Daniel, was troubled in spirit, and the visions that passed through my mind disturbed me. ¹⁶I approached one of those standing there and asked him the true meaning of all this.

"So he told me and gave me the interpretation of these things: ¹⁷ The four great beasts are four kingdoms that will rise from the earth. ¹⁸But the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever—yes, for ever and ever.'

1944 Then I wanted to know the true meaning of the fourth beast, which was different from all the others and most terrifying, with its iron teeth and bronze claws—the beast that crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left.

20 I also wanted to know about the ten horns on its head and about the other horn that came up, before which three of them fell—the horn that looked more imposing than the others and that had eyes and a mouth that spoke boastfully. 21 As I watched, this horn was waging war against the saints and defeating them, 22 until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favor of the saints of the Most High, and the time came when they possessed the kingdom.

²³"He gave me this explanation: 'The fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that will appear on earth. It will be different from all the other kingdoms and will devour the whole earth, trampling it down and crushing it. ²⁴The ten horns are ten kings who will come from this kingdom. After them another king will arise, different from the earlier ones; he will subdue three kings. ²⁵He will speak against the Most High and oppress his saints and try to change the set times and the laws. The saints will be handed over to him for a time, times and half a time.

²⁶"But the court will sit, and his power will be taken away and completely destroyed forever.

²⁷Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High. His

kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him.'

²⁸"This is the end of the matter. I, Daniel, was deeply troubled by my thoughts, and my face turned pale, but I kept the matter to myself."

Original Meaning

CHAPTER 7 SIGNALS a major transition in the book of Daniel. The first half of the book told stories about Daniel and his three friends; we learned about their faith and courage before pagan kings from Nebuchadnezzar to Cyrus. The second half of the book, beginning with chapter 7, reports Daniel's visions of the future. Accordingly, we move from the relatively straightforward narratives of chapters 1–6 to the often enigmatic images of Daniel's prophetic vision.

The Nature of Apocalyptic Literature

IN A WORD, we change genres from the first half of the book to the second. Apocalyptic replaces court narrative, demanding that we change reading strategy. Before launching into an interpretation of this and the following chapters, it is important, though we must necessarily be brief,² to discuss the nature and intention of apocalyptic literature. At this point, we will only examine the genre in terms of its original meaning; in the Bridging Context section, we will explore the legitimate appropriation of apocalyptic into our contemporary world.

The term *apocalyptic* comes from the Greek word *apokalypsis* and simply means "revelation." Indeed, the genre label is taken from the first verse of the New Testament book Revelation (also, not surprisingly, known as the Apocalypse of Saint John) and is applied to other books, both in the Bible and outside, that have similar characteristics.

Daniel is clearly such a book, and we will have recourse to connections between Daniel and Revelation as we interpret the second half of the book. But to say that Daniel and Revelation are a "revelation" is not that illuminating. After all, every book of the Bible is a revelation, in the sense that God is uncovering some aspect of his truth to his people. What is so special about sections like Daniel 7–12?

Ironically, we may get a better insight into the book from its common usage in English than we do from its Greek etymology. Some of us remember that the 1960s and early 1970s were called an apocalyptic moment in history. Political instability and the threat of nuclear extinction, still with us but not felt so imminently, led to an uncertainty about the continuance of the human race itself. Apocalyptic, then, in common parlance communicates an impending sense of doom, a feeling that existence might come to an end at any moment.

With this popular understanding of the term we are getting closer to the biblical idea, but we are not quite there yet. A violent end to history is in the ultimate purview of biblical apocalyptic. However, far from imparting a sense of doom and pessimism, books like Daniel and Revelation radiate with joy and optimism. Why? Because the end is the end of human corruption and the oppression of God's people and is brought about by the audience's warring God. Apocalyptic celebrates God's victory over the enemies of the godly.

Immediately, we note how the apocalyptic chapters of Daniel continue the theme we discovered in the first six chapters. The stories of the first half of the book illustrated how, in spite of present appearances, God is in control and will overcome the seemingly invulnerable evil forces of the day. Whether it was the evil plots of the Babylonian wise men or the rage of the king himself, God protected his people and allowed them to prosper even in adversity.

Now the theme goes further. We move from the present circumstances of God's people in captivity to their ultimate liberation. We move from human evil, evident also in the scope of chapters 7–12, to the perverse spiritual forces that stand behind them. We move from deliverance out of a burning furnace and a lions' den to salvation from the power of death itself (ch. 12)!

But the essence of apocalyptic is more than the content of the message; it concerns its inner nature. Now that we have gotten used to the rather straightforward plots of Daniel 1–6 we suddenly find ourselves in a strange world, a world of hybrid beasts and riders on the clouds. Furthermore, we encounter what look like timetables, but timetables that are impossible to penetrate (see below). Whether it is the 2300 mornings and evenings of chapter 8 or the seventy weeks of chapter 9, we have no firm basis for

relating these periods to time as we know it. What are we to make of these images and dreamlike numbers?

The interpretation of these specific texts await their proper moment, but some words of introduction to apocalyptic style is in order at this point. To get right to the point, apocalyptic is a metaphor-rich genre. In this regard it is like poetry. Metaphors and similes teach by analogy. They throw light on difficult concepts and things by relating them to something we know from common experience. As such, images speak truly and accurately, but not precisely. We often do not know where the analogy stops. In this way, images preserve mystery about ideas that are ultimately beyond our comprehension. It is a travesty, then, to interpret apocalyptic images too finely, to press them in their details. As we will see, this mistake is common among biblical interpreters of apocalyptic and has led to all kinds of fanciful interpretations and outlandish claims. Caution and reserve are virtues in the interpretation of apocalyptic.

Interestingly, however, the images of Daniel are stranger to us than they were to their original audience. In what follows, we will point out that much of the stuff of the imagery comes from previous biblical revelation or from common motifs found in broader ancient Near Eastern literature. Observing these connections certainly makes the imagery more understandable, but does not erase the intentional ambiguity and sense of mystery.

We would also be remiss in our discussion of the images of apocalyptic if we simply talked about what they meant in terms of their references in the "real" world. Images evoke powerful feelings in readers. Again, because the original readers had a more immediate understanding of these images, the feelings would be more potent and natural in them. We will make the attempt, through our description, to recover these emotions for the modern reader.

Thus, the rest of this commentary is dedicated to the exposition of Daniel's apocalyptic visions. Even chapter 9, which in large part is a prayer, concludes with an apocalyptic timetable. The result is that, just as in chapters 1–6, many of the themes of chapter 7 will be repeated in chapters 8–12. Here are the major themes that reverberate in this section:

• the horror of human evil, particularly as it is concentrated in the state

- the announcement of a specific time of deliverance
- repentance that leads to deliverance
- the revelation that a cosmic war stands behind human conflict
- judgment as certain for those who resist God and oppress his people
- the equally certain truth that God's people, downtrodden in the present, will experience new life in the fullest sense.

To state it again, each of these themes appear, more or less, in each of the concluding chapters. However, in order to avoid undue repetition especially in the sections on Contemporary Significance, I plan to emphasize one of these themes in each of the following six chapters. 7, with its vision of four hybrid sea beasts, underlines the horror of human evil. Chapter 8, with its prophecy of the 2300 mornings and evenings, will stress the announcement of a specific time of deliverance. Chapter 9, Daniel's prayer requesting forgiveness for past sins, concerns repentance and restoration. Chapter 10, which pushes back the veil that keeps human beings from observing spiritual realities, will reveal the spiritual battle behind the physical one. Chapter 11, with its prophetic description of history, narrating events of the last few centuries B.C., will show how human evil leads inexorably to judgment. Finally, chapter 12 (treated with chapter 11) will conclude the book on a note of victory and resurrection for God's people.

Daniel 7 begins the apocalyptic section of this book. With its striking imagery of four hybrid beasts arising out of a chaotic sea and its ultimate encounter with the cloud-riding figure who looks like a son of man, this chapter is arguably the best known in the second half of the book. Certainly it is the one most frequently quoted and alluded to in the New Testament. Nonetheless, it is also one of the most enigmatic sections of the Old Testament.

In spite of this, the central message of the chapter is clear: God is in control. He will defeat the seemingly unconquerable powers that oppress his people. The intended effect of this message is also obvious: comfort for the faithful. Evil may seem as if it has the upper hand, but that is a

temporary deception. Better to stay faithful and suffer than to fall in with evil and experience God's ultimate judgment.

The chapter may be divided into three parts: (1) horror by the sea (7:1–8); (2) heavenly power (7:9–14); (3) divine victory (7:15–28). The third part also serves as the divinely inspired interpretation of the first two parts, which are different scenes of the same vision.

Horror by the Sea (7:1–8)

THE COURT NARRATIVES ended in the Persian period during the time of Darius the Mede. Chapter 7 scrolls back to the time of Belshazzar, certainly before the event of chapter 5 (which records the last day of Belshazzar's reign and life). The chronological notice in 7:1 indicates that the vision came to Daniel during Belshazzar's first year. Miller suggests that this king's coregency began in 553 B.C., while Goldingay argues for 550/549 B.C. While nothing crucial is at stake here, Goldingay points out the provocative significance of 550/549 B.C., for that was the year that Cyrus the Persian defeated Astyages, his Median overlord. In other words, the process that ultimately led to the demise of Babylonia as the center of human power had begun, and as we will see, one of the main lessons of this chapter is that, although oppressive human power seems unconquerable particularly to the vanquished, human power is in reality temporal. One evil power succeeds another in a cycle of oppression, which will be broken by only divine intervention.

Daniel's vision comes about by means of a dream, and with this note we get an indication of another difference between the closely related genres of prophecy and apocalyptic. Indeed, prophecy and apocalyptic are cousins of one another; they share many similarities, most notably that both at times concern the future. Besides some of the characteristics (content and nature of the message) noted in the section "The Nature of Apocalyptic Literature," apocalyptic is slightly different in terms of the mode of revelation. Whereas the classic prophetic mode of communication is direct from God to the seer, apocalyptic literature reports a more indirect mode of communication.

When God spoke to a prophet like Jeremiah, he spoke directly to him and then told him to speak his message to the people of Judah. When the people responded, the prophet then went back to God for further instructions (Jer. 12). The prophet is God's spokesperson; he brings God's word to the people. A different dynamic is at work in apocalyptic. God speaks to Daniel through a dream (as in Dan. 7) or through a mediator—usually an angel (e.g., Dan. 12:5–13). He is not commissioned to speak to the people but rather to write it down. Significantly, in Daniel 12 the prophet is not commanded to publish his literary revelation broadly, but rather to "close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end" (12:4). The implications of this will be spelled out later in the commentary.

Daniel's report of the vision begins with the setting. He is on the coast of the sea, where the winds are whipping the waves into a frenzy. That Daniel is not giving a scientific description is immediately apparent since he attributes the wildness of the sea to the "four winds of heaven" (v. 2). They are all blowing at once. We are not to simply imagine huge waves crashing into the shore, but rather turbulent, chaotic waters moving in all directions.

On a simple psychological level, this forebodes danger. But reading this description with a broader literary background reveals that even more is at stake here. By the time of Daniel, the sea was already a potent symbol of chaos, indeed of destructive evil.⁵ Here and elsewhere in the second half of Daniel the imagery of the visions may be associated with the mythology of the broader Near East. We may illustrate this with reference to the great creation myths of the Babylonians and the Canaanites.

Let me preface my remarks by pointing out that Daniel's (ultimately God's) use of these images does not mean that the Bible buys into the creation myths themselves. The best understanding of this imagery is that the biblical author evokes well-known mythological motifs to evoke a mood and communicate a message. In the end, as we will observe after we paint the full picture, we will see that, far from mindlessly borrowing this language, the Bible undermines the false religion of its idolatrous neighbors through the use of their imagery.

The most well-known creation story of the Babylonians is the *Enuma Elish*. This tale begins with an account of the creation of the gods. At the beginning stands primordial Tiamat with her consort Apsu. Both of these deities represent different aspects of the waters. Indeed, Tiamat's name, when translated from the Akkadian, means "the Sea." She is the mother of the next generation of deities, including Enlil and Ea. The generation after

Enlil and Ea includes Marduk. The story told in *Enuma Elish* is about how Marduk becomes the head of the pantheon.

The plot gets underway when Apsu, the father, grows angry with his noisy divine children and purposes to get rid of them. Tiamat, the mother, protests, but does not thwart Apsu's intention. However, Ea, the god of wisdom, catches wind of his intentions and succeeds in doing away with Apsu. Far from solving the problem, however, Tiamat is now enraged and turns her more potent forces against her children. Ea and the other gods stand powerless before her. Marduk comes to the rescue and agrees to fight Tiamat, the Sea, with the proviso that if he succeeds, he will be recognized as chief among the gods.

This is not the place to justify what to us in the twentieth century seems a silly theology. The point is that the myth in all seriousness now relates the creation of the world in the light of the struggle between the Creator and the Sea. The fight is between Marduk, the one who brings order in the world, and Tiamat, the one who by her very nature as water desires to abolish order and boundaries.

The story is dramatically told,⁷ but I will relate just its conclusion. Marduk destroys Tiamat, the Sea, and from her body creates the universe as we know it (including humankind). Nonetheless, somehow the sea continues to threaten to abolish the creation, so that Marduk must set up boundaries and guards to keep the world from reverting to its former formless state. In other words, the sea is a force ranged against God and creation in Mesopotamian theology.

The Canaanites have a similar story to tell,⁸ but in place of Marduk and Tiamat stand their gods Baal and Yam (whose name also means "the Sea").⁹ Yam attempts to take over the leadership of the gods and wants to put Baal in custody. Baal will have nothing to do with it and resists Yam. To make a long story short, he defeats Sea and becomes the head of the pantheon.¹⁰

Again, we should not get lost in the details of these stories. The point is that deep in the psyche of the people of the ancient Near East the sea was more than a dangerous place. It was a threatening force that was ranged against the beneficial forces of creation.

Daniel was not the first one to use sea imagery in this way. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, Yahweh's struggle and victory over evil is recounted as a fight against the sea and its monsters. God blasts the sea with his rebuke (Ps. 18:15); he sets a guard over the sea (Job 7:12; Jer. 5:22); he causes the sea to dry up (Nah. 1:4); he treads on the sea (Hab. 3:15); and he fights the sea monsters (Isa. 27:1).¹¹

The bottom line of this lengthy but important discussion is that the description of the sea at the beginning of Daniel's vision evokes horror and an anticipation of evil. The following verses do not disappoint this expectation.

The scene is thus set. It already evokes horror, but the story is just beginning. Out of the chaotic sea arises four great beasts, one after the other. Before commenting on the beasts individually, I need to make several general observations. (1) The beasts (with the exception of the second) are like none to be found in God's creation. That is the point—they are symbols of forces ranged against God and his creation order. These beasts are bizarre; they are mutants, perversions of what God intended by his creation. As such, they evoke not only horror in the original reader, but also revulsion.

Two lines of evidence indicate to us the Israelite reader's strong reaction to the mixed character of these beasts. (a) The first is the creation story. Here God made the various components of his creation "according to their ... kinds" (*mino: Gen. 1:11–12, 21, 24, 25); the different parts of creation were created to be unique and separate. (b) The Israelite concern with separation of species was embedded in their laws, which indicated that the original creation order was to be preserved through history. A series of laws in Deuteronomy 22:9–11 is a case in point. "Do not plant two kinds of seed in your vineyard; if you do, not only the crops you plant but also the fruit of the vineyard will be defiled. Do not plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together. Do not wear clothes of wool and linen woven together." Thus, the four beasts that arise from the chaotic sea are images of grotesque horror to the original Israelite readers.

(2) We cannot be certain where the specific imagery of the beasts originates. There have been many suggestions. For instance, attention has been drawn to the hybrid beasts of Mesopotamian art.¹² P. A. Porter has read the description of the beasts of Daniel 7 in the light of the description of anomalous births in Babylonian divination texts¹³ and argued that the symbolism derives from those texts.¹⁴ Perhaps the imagery does derive from one or more of these sources; we cannot be sure. In any case, even without

the knowledge of the origin of the imagery, the horrific impact of the beasts does not escape us.

(3) An obvious similarity exists between the four-kingdom scheme in the present chapter and the four-kingdom scheme of Nebuchadnezzar's vision in chapter 2. In that chapter we described the conflict between those (mostly conservative) commentators who identified the four successive kingdoms as Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome, and those who argued for the pattern Babylon, Media, Persia, and Greece. The same debate rages in the interpretation of Daniel 7 as well.

In my opinion there are strengths and weaknesses with both approaches.¹⁷ Perhaps the greatest problem is that chapter 7 goes on to describe the climax of the vision as the complete destruction of human evil power at the hands of the "one like a son of man" (v. 13) and "the saints of the Most High" (v. 18). Even today, more than two and a half millennia after Daniel, we still look to the future for this to happen (see Contemporary Significance section). Ancient Greece is no more; ancient Rome is no more. And contrary to some special pleading on the part of contemporary sensationalist interpretation, there are no modern descendants of the Roman empire today.¹⁸ We will argue that, though the vision begins with the Babylonian empire, its multivalent imagery intends to prohibit definite historical identifications with the remaining three beasts. Rather, the fourfold pattern simply informs us that evil kingdoms will succeed one another (at least seemingly) until the end of time. The people of God must recognize that this is God's plan and prepare for persecution.

(4) These beasts represent "four kingdoms that will rise from the earth" (v. 17), and this from no less an authority than the interpreting angel of the second half of this chapter. We import this divinely imparted insight into our present discussion for economy of discussion, for here we will comment on the meaning and significance of the first three beasts. We will reserve our comments about the fourth beast primarily for the last section of this chapter, since that is where the interpreting angel focuses our attention in verses 15–28.

The beasts come out of the chaotic sea one after the other. The first is described as "like a lion, and it had the wings of an eagle. I watched until its wings were torn off and it was lifted from the ground so that it stood on two feet like a man, and the heart of a man was given to it" (v. 4). As with the

statue in chapter 2, we begin in the present. There the head of gold was explicitly identified as Nebuchadnezzar (i.e., the Babylonian empire). Here, in the waning years of that same empire, the most natural interpretation of the symbolism is that it stands for Babylonia. Perhaps the clearest key to this identification is the fact that the hybrid animal becomes human-like, reminiscent of Nebuchadnezzar's own experience as recorded in chapter 4.

The lion and the eagle are both proud animals; they are both animals of prey. They strike fear in the hearts of the other animals, who are their food. Because of these characteristics, many great empires choose one or both animals as their national symbol. There is nothing in particular that relates them to Babylonia.

The same may be said for the second beast that rises out of the sea, the bear. For whatever reason this beast is not a hybrid but it still is a ferocious animal of prey. Indeed, the picture drawn of this particular bear has it gnawing three ribs while it is raised up on one of its sides. Its voracious appetite is encouraged by a voice that cries out, "Get up and eat your fill of flesh!"

It is with this second beast that the classic debate begins. Is the bear Medo-Persia or Media? Historically, we know Persia became a great empire by first acquiring the formerly dominant Medes into its empire. True, it was Cyrus the Persian whose forces defeated the Babylonians in 539 B.C., but it was through the agency (according to the book of Daniel) of Darius the Mede.

The imagery can be pressed to argue either position. The Medo-Persian identification argues that Media never existed as an independent world empire and that the three ribs can be identified with the three great victories of the Medo-Persian alliance: Lydia, Babylon, and Egypt. Gurney, an evangelical who argues for an identification with Media alone, cites Jeremiah 51:27–29, which lists Ararat, Minni, and Ashkenaz as Media's three allies as they go against Babylon.¹⁹ Walton clarifies this passage by stating that the three "represent respectively Urartu, which was subdued by the Medes in 605 B.C.; Mannaea, an ally of Assyria in its final days, which fell to the Medes shortly after the collapse of Assyria; and the Scythians, who were repulsed by the Medes, probably in the reign of Cyaxares II."²⁰ Thus, we already find ourselves on slippery ground when it comes to specific and concrete historical identifications of the imagery of the four

beasts. It is my argument that this is an intentional effect of the imagery of the vision. The purpose is not so much writing history in advance as making a theological statement about the conflict between human evil and God.

The intentional ambiguity continues with the third beast. The beast looks like a leopard, but it has four wings and four heads. As we look for the point of the imagery, we are drawn immediately to the characteristic of speed. Leopards are fast cats, and with the addition of wings, we are to imagine blazing speed. Is the significance of this imagery the blazing speed of the Persian army and are the four heads to be associated with four kings of Persia,²¹ or does it point to Alexander's *Blitzkrieg* through the Orient and the four generals who divided his vast empire after his early death?

The fourth kingdom is the most enigmatic of all. "It was different from all the former beasts" (v. 7). It appears to be only vaguely animal-like. Later, its description will be expanded to having "iron teeth and bronze claws" (v. 19). Someone like myself who enjoys science fiction is tempted to label this fourth "Robo-beast." But of course, it is not a robot. The metallic composition of its weapons (teeth and claws) simply highlights its destructive power and ruthlessness. There is little concrete description here by which we may argue for a specific identification, so the classic approaches to this text have recourse to simple historical sequence. If one has already identified the first three as Babylon, Media, and Persia, then the fourth must be Greek. If, on the other hand, one has combined Media and Persia and identified the third as Greece, then the fourth kingdom must be Roman. We will return to this question and the function of the horns in the last section of this chapter.

Heavenly Power (7:9–14)

VERSE 9 Is an abrupt transition from the scene by the sea to a courtroom. From its description, we know this is no ordinary courtroom, but again, the vision speaks in images. Note first of all that we no longer have descriptions of animal-like creatures. The two main characters are described in human-like terms: "the Ancient of Days" and the "one like a son of man."

In essence, we have gone up the chain of being. Evil human kingdoms were described as horrifying hybrid animals; the divine realm is imaged as human beings. The association is perfectly appropriate in a broader biblical

view because, after all, Genesis 1:27 tells us that God created men and women in his own image.

While it is not clear from the description whether the scene takes place in heaven or on earth,²² the imagery makes it clear that the two main participants are divine and that the attendants are celestial and not human creatures. Much of the imagery is not uncommonly associated with God's appearance (theophany) and signals his wisdom (his white hair), his righteousness (his white clothing), and his power in judgment (fire).

The first figure is called the "Ancient of Days." He is God, specifically in his role as judge. As such, he is imaged as an old and presumably wise human judge sitting in his courtroom. The second figure, "one like a son of man," is more startling in his Old Testament context. He is riding the cloud chariot, which is the prerogative of God alone.

Like the image of the sea, the image of the cloud rider is an ancient one by the time we come to Daniel 7:13. Cloud imagery associated with the Lord's appearance is as old as the Exodus and the pillar of cloud by day and the fire by night (Ex. 13:21). During the climactic theophany on Sinai, the mountain was covered by a cloud (19:16). In the tabernacle, God appeared in the cloud that was present in the Most Holy Place (Lev. 16:2).

We learn of the vehicular cloud, however, in the Psalms and Prophets. God is the cloud rider in Psalm 68:4:

Sing to God, sing praise to his name, extol him who rides on the clouds—his name is the LORD—and rejoice before him.

In Psalm 104:3–4 we read:

He makes the clouds his chariot and rides on the wings of the wind. He makes winds his messengers, flames of fire his servants. The Old Testament prophets also use the cloud-riding image in clear judgment/war contexts. Note Isaiah 19:1 and Nahum 1:3:

See, the LORD rides on a swift cloud and is coming to Egypt.

The idols of Egypt tremble before him, and the hearts of the Egyptians melt within them. The LORD is slow to anger and great in power; the LORD will not leave the guilty unpunished. His way is in the whirlwind and the storm, and clouds are the dust of his feet.

Like the sea image, the motif of God riding clouds also has an ancient Near Eastern background. This connection may be most closely observed in the literature from Ugarit. Baal, the chief deity and primary divine warrior of that culture, is often called the "Rider on the Clouds." Indeed it is one of his most common epithets:

"Hearken, O Puissant Baal: Give heed, O Rider on the Clouds."²³

This example could be multiplied many times. Baal was the god of the thunderstorm in the Ugaritic pantheon. His cloud-riding was appropriate to his function.

Thus, Daniel 7:1–14 presents the reader with two image clusters. On the one hand, we have four beasts and horns, which represent depraved human kingdoms; on the other hand, we see two human figures, the Ancient of Days and one like a son of man, who image the divine realm. The identity of the "one like a son of man" has been a difficult one through the history of interpretation. We will reserve discussion of this critical issue for the section on Contemporary Significance.

The vision is more than descriptive of these two realms: human evil and divine judgment. It also narrates a conflict between the two, with a certain and clear conclusion. "The beast," presumably the boastful horn, was destroyed, while the one like the son of man was exalted and given an

eternal kingdom. In a word, though human evil thrives in the present, God is in control and will have the final victory. The implicit message to God's people is: "Remain faithful in spite of appearances." The interpretation of the vision that follows bears this message out.

Divine Victory (7:15–28)

DANIEL REACTS TO the vision with fear and confusion. His fear signals to us later readers the overwhelming force of the revelation. Daniel looks into the abyss of human evil and into the very throne room of God. No wonder he is shaken by the experience. His confusion drives him to an angel who is present to assist him with the interpretation of these marvelous things.

The angel's initial response is short and sweet: "The four great beasts are four kingdoms that will rise from the earth. But the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever—yes, for ever and ever" (vv. 17–18). As simply stated as this answer is, an ambiguity remains that is not directly addressed in what follows, namely, the identity of the "saints of the Most High." Those who read this expression in modern English translations today most naturally think of "saints" as human and take it as a reference to God's oppressed people. However, in the Aramaic (qaddise 'elyonim) and in the context of its use in the Dead Sea scrolls and elsewhere in Daniel (4:13; 8:13), the phrase refers to angelic beings.

The debate on this issue has raged, but the angelic interpretation is by far the most dominant today.²⁴ Certainly, it paints a powerful picture that will be further expanded in chapter 10. Behind the earthly struggle stands a cosmic struggle. The exiled Israelites are not just engaged in an earthly battle, but one with heavenly significance. That God and his angels will "receive the kingdom" is good news to those who are on God's side on earth.

Nonetheless, the phrase can refer to human beings as well,²⁵ and perhaps it is best understood to imply both God's human and angelic creatures. Whether it refers directly to God's people or indirectly to them through their spiritual representatives, the message is the same: God will win this great cosmic battle. This is good news for all of those who follow God, especially those who feel the cruel hand of their evil oppressors.

But Daniel's confusion and fear have not yet subsided, so he follows up his question with another, this time focusing on the nature of the fourth beast. The significance of the fourth beast is its climactic place in the future. It intensifies the evil of its predecessors and produces pernicious offspring in the form of eleven horns. The eleventh horn is the most rebellious: "He will speak against the Most High and oppress his saints and try to change the set times and the laws. The saints will be handed over to him for a time, times and half a time" (v. 25).

The image of a horn is well known from other biblical references. Pride and honor, whether godly (1 Sam. 2:1; Ps. 89:17[18], 24[25]; 112:9) or ungodly (Ps. 75:5), is often described by the image of a lifted-up horn, stemming from the idea of a powerful animal lifting its head high. In our present passage, the connotation is that of uncalled-for pride. It is a rebellious refusal to submit to God.

As already indicated, much energy has been exerted as to the identity of the fourth beast and the associated horns. A strong case can be made (based especially on the clear meaning of Dan. 8) that the fourth beast is Greece and the ten horns are the kings that followed Alexander (though working that out is difficult), with the climactic horn being associated with the insidious figure of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who oppressed God's faithful people in the middle of the second century B.C.

Critics, however, have pointed out that although Antiochus himself died and passed from the scene, his death could hardly be said to be followed by the incoming of God's kingdom.²⁶ For this reason, other scholars have argued that the fourth kingdom must be Rome and the ten horns should be identified as ten kingdoms that arise from that political entity, to be followed by a climactic rebel to be identified as the Antichrist in the New Testament. We will say more about the latter in the Contemporary Significance section. But for now let it suffice to say that there is much to commend this approach in the light of later, fuller biblical revelation. The little horn will be defeated at the conclusion of the great cosmic struggle, a point to which the world has not yet arrived.

The only criticism to be made is the insistence that the fourth kingdom be specifically identified with Rome. Rome exists no more; it cannot be revived except perhaps in political propaganda. There are no Roman people, for instance. To think of the ten horns and the little horn as future manifestations of the Roman empire is bizarre. The best way to view the imagery of Daniel 7 is not in terms of four specific evil empires, but as four kingdoms symbolically representing the fact that evil kingdoms (of an

unspecified number)²⁷ will succeed one another from the time of the Exile to the time of the climax of history, when God will intervene and once and for all judge all evil and bring into existence his kingdom.

It remains to comment on the enigmatic phrase "a time, times and half a time." This chronological reference is in answer to the implicit question of how long the little horn will be allowed to flaunt his power against God and his "saints." This expression is often taken to mean "one year, two years, and half a year," that is, three and a half years. The claim is then made that later chronological references give roughly the same time period. Those who believe the little horn is Antiochus Epiphanes cite the period of time as roughly equal to the time that king wreaked havoc with the religion of the Jewish people in 168–165 B.C. Some of those who believe the reference is to the future time of the Antichrist prefer to speak of three and a half years of tribulation for God's people at the time of the second coming of Christ.

However, questions must be raised about attempts to make this symbolic number so specific. After all, the second phrase is "times," not "two times" (i.e., it is plural, not dual). It is not impossible that the noun can stand for years (if so, it should be understood as "year, years, and half a year"), though it is not clear that it does in this context. It is better to understand this reference to be as vague as it sounds on first reading. Keil is on firmer ground when he argues that the force of the expression is symbolic. That is, the rebellion of the little horn will get off to a fast start and seem like it is going to last forever, but then is suddenly cut off.³⁰

At the end, Daniel remains troubled by the vision. Though it ends well from the perspective of the godly, it does paint a picture of continued and difficult oppression. The divine victory does not come easily, but through a cosmic struggle. But God had more in store for Daniel, as the next chapter immediately demonstrates.

Bridging Contexts

WE HAVE MOVED from historical narration, stories rooted in real events, to apocalyptic visions. In the first half of the book, we have dealt with stories about the past and their relevance for our present at the end of the twentieth century. In the second half of the book, beginning with the present chapter,

the question concerns the relevance of Daniel's visions of the future for us many centuries later.

Apocalyptic frenzy is rearing its head once again, according to "Dark Prophecies," a recent *US News and World Report* article.³¹ In the magazine's poll of Americans, 66 percent, including a third of those who say they never attend church, admit that they believe Jesus Christ will return to earth some day. Unfortunately, interest in apocalyptic literature does not necessarily add up to competence in interpretation.

I have already stated that Daniel, living in the sixth century B.C., saw things beyond even his immediate future. Indeed, most would agree that Daniel's vision here and in the following chapter culminates at the climax of history, when God will come and rid the world of its evil oppressors and set up his own eternal kingdom. When stated in this way, we begin to see the continuing relevance of the apocalyptic chapters of the book of Daniel. We still live in, as Paul puts it, a "present evil age" (Gal. 1:4), from which we look to God for deliverance. In the next section, we will describe this age a little more closely as well as God's further revelation concerning our deliverance, but for now we need to pause and explore the principles for applying the lessons of ancient apocalyptic to our modern age and also bring to the fore the dominant themes of this particular chapter.

Principles for applying ancient apocalyptic. (1) The first principle for applying ancient apocalyptic is this: "Be reserved." That is, we must exercise caution in our interpretation of these highly metaphoric visions. This caution is particularly relevant on the eve of the end of the second millennium A.D. At different times and in different places, the church has found its attention riveted on the apocalyptic texts of the Bible. Don't misunderstand, the pictures of the end that apocalyptic gives us are always relevant to the church, but occasionally God's people become obsessed with them.

Typically, these times are times of persecution or great distress for the church or society. It is not surprising that perhaps one of the best-selling books of all time, Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*,³² a sensationalist book dealing with biblical apocalyptic, was published during the socially turbulent 1960s or that the recent Gulf War saw the publication and excessive sales of other books, cashing in on supposed connections between modern events and biblical apocalyptic.³³ While the interpretations

of these books cannot be defended, they do demonstrate the original intention of apocalyptic: to provide comfort to God's people during times of trouble.

But what makes apocalyptic particularly relevant for today? In some countries around the world, Christians find themselves in deep distress, experiencing persecution. For them, the message of apocalyptic is relevant in the same way that we just described. In the West, however, even though this is a time of relative peace and economic security, apocalyptic has captured the attention of many because of the turn of the millennium. The same phenomenon could be seen a thousand years ago in Europe, the last time the millennium changed. Medieval Europe was a culture saturated in Christian theology, so the impact of apocalyptic speculation was more widespread; but even today, everyone knows the significance of Waco and many of the unsettling apocalyptic pronouncements of Harold Camping.³⁴ Others have seen the tract "Eighty-Eight Reasons for 1988" by Mr. Edgar Whisenant, and other claims that we live in the time of the end.

In Daniel 8 we will deal more specifically with the (mis)use of apocalyptic materials to try to determine whether we are living on the eve of the end of time, but for now let this serve as a signal that as we deal with these materials, we do so with reserve and caution.

(2) We do this first by remembering that we are dealing with a type of literature that uses images with high frequency. Images communicate truth, to be sure, but not with precision. An image brings together two things that are essentially not alike in order to cast light on some aspect of the object of teaching. God is an "Ancient of Days," sitting as a judge on a throne. Literally, of course, God is not an old man, nor does he sit on a physical throne. Evil human kingdoms are hybrid beasts. Yes, but not literally. To approach this material as if it demands or even invites a literal interpretation is wrongheaded. Thus, a crucial principle to reading apocalyptic literature according to its original intention is to expect images. It is wrong to say that we interpret apocalyptic literally except when it is absurd to do so.

Now, the key to the interpretation of images is to find the point of connection and not push the peripheral elements of the comparison. This means we will be left with a gray area in our interpretation. Some of the points of comparison will be obvious, but others will not be. At such points we need to hold back and not insist on our interpretation.

- (3) A further important point that will prevent us from typical misunderstanding is that numbers are especially used in a symbolic manner in apocalyptic. Whether it is the "time, times, and half a time" of Daniel 7 or the "seventy weeks" of Daniel 9 or the one thousand years of Revelation 20, we must expect that we are dealing with symbolic numbers because that is the nature of apocalyptic as a genre.³⁵
- (4) One important way we can guard ourselves against misinterpreting these powerful images is by imagining ourselves as among those who heard these things at the time of Daniel. In the earlier discussion, I noted the ancient Near Eastern background of many of the images of Daniel 7—the sea and cloud-riding in particular. It is an important principle to read all Scripture in its original setting, especially apocalyptic. This principle, of course, calls for some work as we interpret, but the fact that you are reading this commentary indicates that you are willing to engage in the necessary task of research for proper biblical interpretation.

I want to qualify this last point by saying that the basic message of apocalyptic is communicated even to modern readers without extensive research. One cannot help but understand that the vision teaches God's people that, although it looks as if the world is under the power of human evil running rampant and is not under God's control, in this case looks are deceiving. God is in control, and there is no question concerning who is going to win this struggle. Stay faithful. Yet to prevent the outlandish and speculative interpretation of this material that is only too common, we must remember that the images and language come from antiquity.

Dominant themes of Daniel 7. To conclude by way of summary, Daniel 7 is a vision of two parts. The first part reveals that the world at present is under the sway of evil and cruel human power. The second part shows us that God is in control and will ultimately judge the rebels and establish his kingdom among us. At present there is conflict—indeed, a cosmic war, about which we will learn more particularly in chapter 10—between the evil forces of this world and God and his faithful creatures. These, then, are the important apocalyptic themes to explore in the Contemporary Significance section: the nature of human evil, the warring activity of God, and the certainty of ultimate victory.

THE NATURE OF human evil. Daniel 7 paints a horrifying picture of human evil. The hybrid beasts represent powerful, destructive forces that intend to harm others. The metal teeth and the iron claws of the fourth beast intend to rip into its prey, and the godly know that they are the beast's intended meal.

Many Christians around the world today immediately understand this image. Christians in many countries know and experience the harsh rule of regimes that hate Christianity and will expend great efforts to squash its practice. In the present day, Christians in China, Indonesia, Iraq, Iran, to name just a few, live in daily fear of losing their freedom, if not their lives. In other countries—one thinks of Israeli citizens who choose to follow Christ—the threat is not physical torture, but extreme prejudice against their religious practice (not to speak of the far more numerous Palestinian Christians who live under foreign oppression). These brothers and sisters have no trouble recognizing the beast-like nature of the world in which they live.

Most Christians in the West, however, enjoy a freedom from religious harassment that may not be total, but is certainly nearly unprecedented in human history. We often forget this as we bitterly rail against the loss of "blue laws," threats against our churches' tax-free status, or our government's support of the right to abortion. Where is the beast gnawing on the bones of the people of God in the United States? After all, we see pleasant neighborhoods with our nice neighbors and flourishing churches. We wonder: "What is all this talk about superhuman power of destructive human evil?"

Of course, this experience and attitude are not shared by all Christians in America. Some of our neighborhoods, particularly in our large urban centers, are the scene of daily violence and fear. The harm is not directed especially toward the church, but Christian people find themselves in near war zones because of the actions of the renegades of our society, whether those renegades are the criminal element or crooked police. These brothers and sisters in Christ also resonate immediately with the picture of life as a battleground with life-and-death consequences—a battleground from which they desire deliverance.

However, deep down, if not on the surface, those Christians who are fortunate enough not to live in a literal battle zone understand that life is a struggle, sometimes just annoying but at least occasionally a battle of nearly

epic proportions. We know that whatever "peace" we experience now in our life is just a lull in the midst of a storm.

The Bible, after all, teaches that all human beings are sinners. The picture of the beasts in Daniel 7 is consistent with this lesson we learn throughout the Bible—every man and woman at heart is a self-seeking rebel against God, and we would crawl over the bodies of our fellow human beings in order to seek some small advantage for ourselves.

In a classic statement on the scope and depth of sin in the human heart, Paul collects a series of quotations from the Old Testament and strings them together in a universal condemnation of humanity (Rom. 3:10–18):

There is no one righteous, not even one;
there is no one who understands,
no one who seeks God.

All have turned away,
they have together become worthless;
there is no one who does good,
not even one.

Their throats are open graves;
their tongues practice deceit.

The poison of vipers is on their lips.
Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.

Their feet are swift to shed blood;
ruin and misery mark their ways,
and the way of peace they do not know.
There is no fear of God before their eyes.

No one escapes this judgment—not the ruthless dictator, the benevolent president, the hard-working mayor, our law-abiding neighbor, our children and spouse, and especially not ourselves. Everyone is a sinner, "swift to shed blood." The beast is in the heart of each one of us.

Cornelius Plantinga has written an insightful analysis of the biblical view of sin, in which he defines sin as a breaking of "shalom," the Hebrew word for "wholeness, health, peace." In his words, "shalom is God's design for creation and redemption; sin is blamable human vandalism of these great realities and therefore an affront to their architect and builder."³⁶

We should be quick to point out that God did not create us as "vandals." He created us in his image. The Garden of Eden was a picture of shalom until the appearance of the serpent. The serpent's identity in the Garden is obscure, though later biblical reflection makes it clear that this is Satan (cf. Rev. 12:9), the supernatural rebel. This creature introduced disharmony into the peace of the Garden, but human sin was not his responsibility. As I was driving the other day, I saw a bumper sticker that simply said, "Eve was framed." That is not the biblical story. Eve was neither framed nor coerced, nor was Adam. The disobedience of Adam and Eve broke the shalom of the Garden when they took the side of the serpent against God.

We know this first sin as the Fall (Gen. 3). Adam and Eve were ejected from the Garden into a harsh land of their own making. We are the heirs of our primordial parents. We are born sinners, but not in the sense that we are tagged with the guilt of our ancestors. No, we weren't framed either. The point is that we would have acted in the same way as Adam and Eve if we were in their place. And indeed we act in the same way from birth. We are born rebels, vandals, breakers of shalom.

But the beasts are more than individual sinners. The beasts represent corporate rebellion as well.³⁷ Yet it is important to realize that corporate rebellion is a product that flows from individual sin, not vice versa. Otherwise, individuals may flee responsibility for corporate harm.

The beasts represent "kingdoms," not just one sinner but an organized plurality of sinners. I remember the wise words of my former teacher, Jay Adams, when he warned his young students about an overly romantic view of marriage. He alerted us that marriage would not be the answer to all our loneliness or problems. He said that our current problems flowed from the fact that we, like all human beings, are sinners. He then reminded us that marriage was a union of two sinners and challenged us by saying, "What do you think happens when two sinners are brought together?" His warning was wise because it prevented us from being shocked when, after marriage, we had our first disagreement or argument.

Adams was talking about a marriage of two Christians. Imagine the union of thousands, millions, and today even billions of sinners? Imagine further that a handful of these sinners are given the power of decision, even the power of incredible destructive forces. Can we really be surprised at the

callousness of an oriental despot, a Caesar, a medieval king, a Führer, an Ayatollah, or a president?

Individual sinners are harmful, sometimes deeply. But sinners bound together behind a group cause can cause great devastation. Nationalism, racism, sexism, denominationalism, factionalism—great evil can arise when sinners come together with a common purpose against someone outside of the group, the "other." We can depersonalize the other; they aren't quite human, and so to harm the other is not quite the same as hurting one of our own. George Steiner reminds modern sophisticated culture that such attitudes reside in the breasts of all people:

It would be fantastically arrogant to suppose that we know that we have evolved into a kind of creature that likes living with those that smell different, look different, sound different. Sit in a railway carriage or bus in a land where you don't speak a single word of the language. Have you ever noticed the panic that starts growing in your civilized soul, the sense that something is hideously wrong, that your very identity may soon be torn apart? It could be that autonomy is the natural form of the social unit, and that those who would thrust others together may be doing so in the name of a transcendent vision of justice, hope, human fairness, but that they may also be hurrying something very complicated. We don't know. Human beings do tend to be with their own. Not all. Not the exceptional. But most human beings.³⁸

Of course, not every nation or its ruler is a repository of evil. We must also account for common grace as well as the work of the Holy Spirit. But the phrase "power corrupts" rings true for a reason. The point is that the power of the beast image is as true today as it was at the time of Daniel, when God's people were oppressed by Babylon, in the middle of the second century B.C., when they were oppressed by the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes, or at the time of Jesus, when the Romans held sway in Palestine.

The warring activity of God. Ultimately, the battle is "not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 6:12). This ultimate spiritual battle behind our earthly struggles was anticipated in the Old Testament (see esp. the comments in Dan. 10), but the New Testament rips away the curtain so that we see the heart of the battle.

This battle will continue until the final day. When we turn to Revelation 13, what do we encounter? A beast, indeed, a beast emerging from the sea. Revelation's imagery derives most immediately from the book of Daniel.³⁹ This insight reminds us of our continuity with the fears and struggles of Daniel's generation. We too find ourselves in a struggle that threatens to overwhelm us.

But Daniel did not just paint a picture of horrifying and seemingly invulnerable evil. We will reserve discussion for the chapters to follow, but we cannot leave Daniel 7 without attention to the picture of hope in the midst of the chaos. A "son of man" rides a cloud to the rescue of those who are oppressed by the beastly human kingdoms. We have already commented that the cloud signals the divine status of this human-like figure. Only God rides the ethereal war chariot.

But the more precise identity of this figure awaits the fuller revelation of the New Testament. In Revelation 1:7 and in the so-called "little apocalypses" of the Gospels (cf. Mark 13:26), Jesus himself is the One who rides the cloud chariot into the final battle. Jesus is the divine warrior, who will defeat the beast, the forces of evil at the end of time.

The certainty of ultimate victory. How can we be sure of victory? What makes us think that Jesus will conquer rather than the serpent? The cross is our guarantee. Jesus defeated Satan on the cross. This is the testimony of Paul, who wrote concerning the removal of our sin: "He took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Col. 2:14–15).

Paul's use of military language is not accidental, but is part and parcel of the canon-wide theme of divine warfare. From the beginning of the canon (Ex. 15:3) to its end in Revelation, God's people are told that their Lord fights for them against the evil that oppresses them—both external enemies

and the sin that remains in their own hearts.⁴⁰ This is the comfort that the Bible presents to God's people today, whether a Christian in an Iranian jail or one in America feeling the ridicule of a "toxic culture"⁴¹ in the West. God has won the victory on the cross, and history's victorious denouement is certain.

Daniel 7 gives us a glimpse of the warfare that explains conflict in the world today, and chapters 10–12 will take us even further into these divine mysteries.

Daniel 8:1-27

¹In the third year of King Belshazzar's reign, I, Daniel, had a vision, after the one that had already appeared to me. ²In my vision I saw myself in the citadel of Susa in the province of Elam; in the vision I was beside the Ulai Canal. ³I looked up, and there before me was a ram with two horns, standing beside the canal, and the horns were long. One of the horns was longer than the other but grew up later. ⁴I watched the ram as he charged toward the west and the north and the south. No animal could stand against him, and none could rescue from his power. He did as he pleased and became great.

⁵As I was thinking about this, suddenly a goat with a prominent horn between his eyes came from the west, crossing the whole earth without touching the ground. ⁶He came toward the two-horned ram I had seen standing beside the canal and charged at him in great rage. ⁷I saw him attack the ram furiously, striking the ram and shattering his two horns. The ram was powerless to stand against him; the goat knocked him to the ground and trampled on him, and none could rescue the ram from his power. ⁸The goat became very great, but at the height of his power his large horn was broken off, and in its place four prominent horns grew up toward the four winds of heaven.

⁹Out of one of them came another horn, which started small but grew in power to the south and to the east and toward the Beautiful Land. ¹⁰It grew until it reached the host of the heavens, and it threw some of the starry host down to the earth and trampled on them. ¹¹It set itself up to be as great as the Prince of the host; it took away the daily

sacrifice from him, and the place of his sanctuary was brought low. ¹²Because of rebellion, the host ∟of the saints and the daily sacrifice were given over to it. It prospered in everything it did, and truth was thrown to the ground.

¹³Then I heard a holy one speaking, and another holy one said to him, "How long will it take for the vision to be fulfilled—the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, the rebellion that causes desolation, and the surrender of the sanctuary and of the host that will be trampled underfoot?"

¹⁴He said to me, "It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated."

¹⁵While I, Daniel, was watching the vision and trying to understand it, there before me stood one who looked like a man. ¹⁶And I heard a man's voice from the Ulai calling, "Gabriel, tell this man the meaning of the vision."

¹⁷As he came near the place where I was standing, I was terrified and fell prostrate. "Son of man," he said to me, "understand that the vision concerns the time of the end."

¹⁸While he was speaking to me, I was in a deep sleep, with my face to the ground. Then he touched me and raised me to my feet.

¹⁹He said: "I am going to tell you what will happen later in the time of wrath, because the vision concerns the appointed time of the end. ²⁰The two-horned ram that you saw represents the kings of Media and Persia. ²¹The shaggy goat is the king of Greece, and the large horn between his eyes is the first king. ²²The four horns that replaced the one that was broken off represent four kingdoms that will emerge from his nation but will not have the same power.

²³"In the latter part of their reign, when rebels have become completely wicked, a stern-faced king, a master of intrigue, will arise. ²⁴He will become very strong, but not by his own power. He will cause astounding devastation and will succeed in whatever he does. He will destroy the mighty men and the holy people. ²⁵He will cause deceit to prosper, and he will consider himself superior. When they feel secure, he will destroy many and take his stand against the Prince of princes. Yet he will be destroyed, but not by human power.

²⁶"The vision of the evenings and mornings that has been given you is true, but seal up the vision, for it concerns the distant future."

²⁷I, Daniel, was exhausted and lay ill for several days. Then I got up and went about the king's business. I was appalled by the vision; it was beyond understanding.

Original Meaning

THE CONNECTION OF Daniel 8 with chapter 7 is obvious. The first verse associates the two by introducing the second vision as occurring "after the one that had already appeared to me." It comes from approximately the same time period, Belshazzar's third year, two years after chapter 7. In addition, the actors in the prophetic visions of both chapters are animals, and we soon see that these animals represent kingdoms, that is, political entities. In both cases, there is a concluding focus on a horn that emanates from these animals. Finally, both chapters concern hostility between the animal kingdoms and the divine realm.

But closer examination forces us to recognize differences between the chapters as well. Some appear relatively incidental to the meaning of the text. For instance, the prophecy in chapter 7 is called a dream, whereas the prophecy in eight is termed a "vision." From the description of the two, the distinction is not so much in terms of content or form, but rather in terms of the way the prophecy is mediated to Daniel (see comment below on v. 1).

Another difference between the prophecies of the two chapters has to do with the nature of the animals and the transparency of the imagery. In chapter 7, we encountered hybrid animals of grotesque appearance, while in chapter 8, the animals seem normal (with the possible exception of the horns). In our description below, we will see the ease with which we can associate these animals and their horns with particular and well-known political entities. This fact explains why commentators over the years have registered little of the interpretive disagreement that we saw in chapter 7.

The similarities between these two chapters mean that the themes of the two are closely related. Indeed, we have already indicated that chapters 7–12 focus on six important themes:

- the horror of human evil, particularly as it is concentrated in the state
- the announcement of a specific time of deliverance
- repentance that leads to deliverance
- the revelation that a cosmic war stands behind human conflict
- judgment as certain for those who resist God and oppress his people
- the equally certain truth that God's people, downtrodden in the present, will experience new life in the fullest sense.

While we will have occasion to comment on each of these themes in this chapter, in keeping with our intention to focus on one of these themes in each of chapters 7–12 (see comments in "The Nature of Apocalyptic Literature" in the Original Meaning section of chapter 7), we will pay particular attention here to the issue of the announcement of a specific time of deliverance. Furthermore, we would be remiss if we did not point out that the overarching theme of this chapter supports the major theme of the book as a whole: *In spite of present circumstances, God will win in the end.*

However, Daniel 8 not only has connections within the book of Daniel. As we read this chapter, we cannot help but think of Ezekiel. Daniel finds himself at the Ulai canal outside of Susa when he receives his vision (1:2), reminiscent of Ezekiel beside the Kebar River (Ezek. 1:1). Ezekiel too

symbolically represented people through the use of animal and shepherd imagery (Ezek. 34).² This connection with Ezekiel will help us to understand the nature of Daniel's vision.

With chapter 8 the book reverts to Hebrew (Aramaic being the language of chs. 2–7). No explanation for the switch back is given in the text, and no scholarly argument has yet achieved a consensus of opinion.

The vision of Daniel in this chapter has, generally speaking, a two-part structure: (1) the vision of a ram and a goat (8:1–14), and (2) the interpretation of the vision (8:15–27).

The Vision of a Ram and a Goat (8:1–14)

Daniel's vision takes place in the third year of Belshazzar's reign. If Hasel is correct, this situates the vision in 548/547 B.C.³ In the vision, Daniel is located near the city of Susa (in the province of Elam) on the Ulai Canal. Some think that Daniel was literally present in this location,⁴ and as a high official in the realm, he certainly could have traveled this distance.⁵ However, the connections noted above with the book of Ezekiel suggests that Daniel, like Ezekiel, was carried to the Ulai by means of his prophetic vision, not physically.

When Daniel had his vision, Susa was already an ancient city and was the leading city of Elam. Later, however, it would become the winter residence of the Persian kings. The significance of the location is probably that it was outside of the Babylonian empire and near the center of future power. According to Collins, the Ulai Canal was a human-made waterway that was called the Eulaeus in later classical writings. Towner is wrong to deny the existence of this waterway or the fact that Susa was an active city during Belshazzar's reign.

The first thing that presents itself to Daniel in the vision is a ram. This ram has two horns and charges with great success in three directions: west, north, and south.

Then a second animal interrupts his vision of the ram. It is a goat, coming from the west. Notable about the goat is a single large horn. This goat attacks the ram ferociously and succeeds in knocking off its horns. The goat utterly overwhelms the ram. It has great speed, indicated by its racing across the landscape "without touching the ground" (v. 5). However, the goat's power does not last forever, perhaps only a very short time. There is

no slow decline of its power, but it is suddenly cut off. The prominent horn is broken and in its place grow four others, spreading out in four directions.

The description of the success and travail of the ram and the goat are simply a prelude to the focus of the passage, which centers on a small horn that grows out of one of the four. Already, we know that the symbol of the horn points to a king or a kingdom.⁸ This small horn takes on large proportions as it grows to the south, to the east, and toward the Beautiful Land. The latter can be none other than Israel itself, the land of milk and honey (cf. Ezek. 20:6, 15), the land considered most attractive by virtue of a divine perspective appreciated by Daniel.

But the growth of this small horn reaches beyond human dimensions. It grows until it attains the "host of the heavens" (v. 10) and enters into a conflict with this heavenly army. Strikingly, the text reports that the small horn achieves some measure of success against its rivals in the sky. Then, climactically, the horn challenges "the Prince of the host" (v. 11). Significantly, its incursion against the Prince is described as harm done to the formal worship of Israel: "It took away the daily sacrifice." This sacrifice may refer specifically to the morning and evening sacrifices at the temple (Ex. 29:39–41; Num. 28:3–8), or it may refer to a disruption of the entire temple ritual. The latter interpretation may be supported by the line that "the place of his [the Prince's] sanctuary was brought low" (v. 11).

Verse 12 is difficult and its interpretation uncertain: "Because of rebellion, the host Lof the saints," and the daily sacrifice were given over to it." The NIV indicates by the half brackets that the genitive phrase "of the saints" is added and suggests in a footnote that the "host" can be taken as "the armies." Indeed, the Hebrew word for "host" usually has military connotations." The problem of the verse surrounds the reference to "rebellion" and "host/armies." We reserve full discussion of the latter when we come to the more illuminating interpretation section in the second half of the chapter, but our conclusion will be that the primary reference is to the heavenly armies of God. Associated with them are faithful Israelites, who fight against the incursions of the small horn (8:9, also to be identified below).

In a word, it is clear that God's side will take some blows during the struggle "because of the rebellion." Is this the rebellion of the little horn or of God's people. Arguments can be given for either side of this debate, but

within this chapter little evidence exists for the latter view. True, in chapter 9 responsibility for the plight of the Israelites in the Babylonian exile rests squarely on the shoulders of the rebellious people. Here, however, we are not talking about the condition of God's people in the sixth century; rather, as we will soon see, we are hearing about the struggles of God's faithful people in the middle of the second century. While it is true that the reference could be to those Jewish people who drifted from God's way at that time, that is doubtful. The meaning of the passage appears to be that God's people suffer at the hands of a power that rebels against God and seeks to take his place.

Again, the astounding fact is that this little horn succeeds at least for a while and that the "truth" was thrown to the ground. Our identification of the historical circumstance in view here awaits the next section, but we will anticipate that discussion by saying that this statement finds its fulfillment in the burning of Torah scrolls by the little horn, as recorded in 1 Maccabees 1:56–57, which describes events in the middle of the second century B.C.: "The books of the law that they found they tore to pieces and burned with fire. Anyone found possessing the book of the covenant, or anyone who adhered to the law, was condemned to death by the decree of the king" (NRSV).

At this point, the action of the vision of Daniel 8 stops. Note that throughout the vision there is no indication of a reversal, a victory of the forces of God over the power of the small horn. The first half of chapter 8 concludes rather with a discussion between two celestial creatures about "how long" these horrible events will last. That "how long" is reminiscent of a frequent lament in the Psalms (cf. Pss. 6:3; 13:1–2; 35:17).

How long will the sanctuary and its ritual be disrupted? While the one celestial being directs his question to the other, it is notable that the answer is addressed not to the celestial being, but rather to Daniel (v. 14): "It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated."

It is with the interpretation of this chronological statement that we encounter the most disagreement about the interpretation of the symbolism of the chapter. Literally, the phrase translates "evening, morning—two thousand, three hundred." Does this mean 2300 days, reflecting the language of Genesis 1 ("there was evening, and there was morning—the

[Xth] day")? Or does it mean 1150 days, with the reference to evening and morning being to the daily sacrifices? In other words, were there 1150 morning sacrifices and 1150 evening sacrifices, totaling 2300 sacrifices but 1150 days? Our answer to this question also awaits the interpretation that follows.

The Interpretation of the Vision (8:15–27)

THE VISION HAS come to an end and Daniel struggles to understand its significance. Suddenly, a humanlike figure appears before him, and he hears the voice of another person "from the Ulai." The text suggests¹² that the voice is disembodied and seems to hover over the waterway. The first figure is named; he is Gabriel (meaning "God's hero"), a leading angel in God's heavenly army.¹³ The source of the voice is not named, but we are surely to believe that it is the voice of God himself, who, after all, commands this powerful angelic being to reveal to Daniel the meaning of the vision that he has been watching.

Gabriel approaches Daniel, and Daniel, overwhelmed by the spiritual power that stands before him, drops to his face. The first words from Gabriel announces the interpretation of the vision under a general heading: It "concerns the time of the end" (v. 17). Later, he will describe the scope of the vision as "what will happen later in the time of wrath, because the vision concerns the appointed time of the end" (v. 19).

This general introduction might at first lead us to believe that the vision concerns the end of history, the consummation, what Christians now refer to as "the Second Coming." Indeed, this phrase can have that sense (cf. 12:4). Some scholars opt for this meaning in this passage.¹⁴ But the clear interpretation of the context of the vision's climax places it squarely in the middle of the second century B.C. In light of that context, we believe that the phrase indicates the end of the persecution initiated by the little horn, identified below with the Seleucid king Antiochus IV.¹⁵

Gabriel interprets the animal symbolism given earlier in the chapter in a precise manner. Unlike chapter 7, where the animals are said to be "four kingdoms," here they are identified with particular and well-known political entities. The ram with the two horns represents the "kings of Media and Persia" (v. 20). In the vision itself, one horn grew larger than the other,

which is surely a reference to the fact that the Persian part of this empire soon swallowed the Median part and assumed dominance.

The goat with the single horn that speedily devastated the ram is "Greece," the single horn being its first king—Alexander the Great. He achieved an unprecedented domination from Italy to India in unbelievable time; but he died suddenly at age 33 in 323 B.C., leaving behind two young sons, Alexander and Herakles.¹⁷ These boys were ultimately murdered, and the world was carved up between Alexander's powerful generals, the Diadochi. The Diadochi are the "four prominent horns" (v. 8; cf. v. 22).

The vision then skips over about two centuries of history (later detailed in the vision of ch. 11). For now the focus goes immediately to one particular horn. Scholars almost universally agree that the horn that grew out of one of the four is the second century B.C. Seleucid ruler, Antiochus IV Epiphanes. We know much about this king from intertestamental writings like the Maccabees. He started out small and grew large. He was not actually the first in line to succeed his older brother Seleucus IV, but through the political manipulation for which he became famous (he was a "master of intrigue" [v. 23]), he managed to push his nephew out of the way and gain the throne. He grew large through military success, pushing his influence into Egypt as well as east into Persian, Parthia, and Armenia, not to speak of his domination of Palestine.

Antiochus IV, however, established himself as a "completely wicked" and "stern-faced king" (v. 23) through his incredible intrusion and disruption of the Jewish ritual. Jewish religion and practice stood in the way of his policy of Hellenization, and among other atrocities, he ordered the cessation of temple sacrifice in 167 B.C. and profaned the temple by introducing a holy object sacred to the god Zeus, to which he sacrificed a pig, abhorrent to Jewish religion. This holy object has been suggested to be a meteorite that became a cult object that the Jews referred to as "an abomination that causes desolation" (9:27).

Such actions against the formal worship of God's people was far more than an affront against the people; it was an attack against heaven itself. Antiochus indeed took a stand against the "Prince of princes," that is, against God. But such arrogance can only lead to one conclusion: utter defeat. The defeat of the small horn is announced simply and definitively: "Yet he will be destroyed, but not by human power" (v. 25). The latter

clause should not be taken to mean that no human agency was involved in the downfall of Antiochus, but rather that the ultimate power behind the Maccabean freedom fighters was God himself, who gave them the victory and allowed them to restore the temple to its former function as a center for worship of the true God.

Finally, the angelic interpreter reaffirms the time frame of the suffering and its end: "The vision of the evenings and mornings that has been given you is true, but seal up the vision, for it concerns the distant future" (v. 26). Interestingly, even in historical retrospect we cannot be dogmatic about the meaning of the 2300 evenings and mornings. Above we have commented that there are at least two equally plausible ways to interpret this number: 2300 days (its most natural reading) or 2300 morning and evening sacrifices (i.e., 1150 days). The second interpretation can be supported by the context and a knowledge of the sacrificial system in Israel.

It is also possible to fit both numbers, approximately, into the time of its fulfillment in the middle of the second century B.C. After all, when does the period start, with the prohibition of sacrifice in late 167 or earlier with the removal of Onias III from the high priesthood in 171? And when does it end, with the reconsecration of the high priesthood in 164 or in 163 when Antiochus died? Or, contrary to both of these literalistic interpretations, is the number symbolic?¹⁸

In the final analysis, we cannot be dogmatic. The number is given not so much so that those who read Daniel's sixth-century prognostications in the second century could compute when the suffering would stop as much as to assure them that God had things under control. Furthermore, the number indicates with certainty that there would be a stopping point to the persecution, even if that number could not be computed into a definite date in the calendar as they knew it. As we will comment in the next sections, this number is typical of chronological numbers throughout the book of Daniel. They may not be used for date settings or for establishing apocalyptic calendars. Moreover, if we cannot be certain of numbers used in prophecies that have already been fulfilled, how likely can we figure out the numbers that point to times in the far distant future?

The prophecy ends with Daniel "exhausted" and confused. Though clear in many regards, the vision would have astounded someone living in the sixth century B.C., where Media, Persia, and Greece were relatively small points on the map. Not only that, but we have seen in regard to the 2300 days that even today, centuries after the fulfillment, certain elements are still not clear to us.

Bridging Contexts

IF WE HAVE been reading through the book of Daniel, by now its major theme is well ingrained in our minds: In spite of present appearances, God is in control and will triumph against the forces of evil. After reading chapter 8, we can readily see how this is the case here. We will spell it out more clearly in the light of the six important points that we anticipated were present to some degree in each of the last six chapters of the book.¹⁹

(1) The horror of human evil is especially concentrated in the state. Like chapter 7, Daniel 8 paints a picture of world history using animal imagery. A goat fights a ram. The goat's single horn is broken and is replaced by four horns. From one of the four a small horn sprouts and assumes god-like proportions. These images clearly represent political entities, nation states that will, from Daniel's sixth-century perspective, rise up in the future. They are all characterized by violence. The ram dominates other unspecified animals; the goat tramples the ram. Its horn is broken off, and the cycle of violence goes on and on.

The focus, however, is on the violence of the small horn, which is directed against God and his hosts. The small horn attacks the formal worship of God's people, and thus this violence is a new level of horror that cannot go unanswered.

- (2) A specific time of deliverance is announced. Daniel 8 gives a limit to the time in which the small horn can work its devastation: 2300 evenings and mornings. We noted above the difficulty of determining the precise length of time this represents. In Daniel's words, "it was beyond understanding" (v. 27). It is this theme we will explore in greater detail in the Contemporary Significance section, so we reserve further discussion until that time.
- (3) Repentance leads to deliverance. This theme is absent or at least subdued in this chapter. There is ambiguity in the sentence in verse 12, "Because of rebellion, the host Lof the saints and the daily sacrifice were given over to it [the horn]." Is the rebellion that causes the turmoil the

rebellion of the people who are thus punished by the small horn, who would then be God's unknowing tool of judgment? Or is the rebellion the assault of the small horn on God, which has evil consequences for his people? We cannot know for sure, but even if the former (which I think is less likely) is true, it is still the case that the present chapter (as opposed esp. to ch. 9) focuses more on the atrocities directed against God and his hosts than on any sin that holds God's people culpable for their suffering.

(4) A cosmic war stands behind human conflict. In historical retrospect, we can assert with great certainty that the climactic battle described in this chapter as instigated by the small horn is the persecution of the Seleucid king Antiochus IV against observant Jewish people in the mid-second century B.C. However, the prophetic description of this future event makes it clear that more is going on behind the scenes. We await chapter 10 for an even more dramatic disclosure, but we already get an overture to the theme that a spiritual conflict stands behind the earthly one. It is not Antiochus versus the Maccabees alone, but it is a little horn who presumes to be a god who fights against the Prince of princes and his starry hosts. A cosmic battle is ultimately at issue here. A fuller discussion of this theme is found in chapter 10.

With the god-like pretension of Antiochus, we also see how readily he can become a symbol for all those who in their overweening pride seek to replace God on the throne of the universe. Of course, Satan was the first to attempt this rebellion against his Creator, but Christians know that someone is coming who will seek to replace God and will help instigate the events that lead to God's final redemptive intrusion into human events. Later, we will explore how Antiochus becomes an apt symbol for the one Christians know as the Antichrist.

(5) Judgment is certain for those who resist God and oppress his people. The vision itself ends with a rather subdued statement of the downfall of the small horn. The bulk of the description of the small horn's career is on its seeming successes. It is only in answer to the question "how long" this wicked devastation will be allowed to continue that the angel says simply, "It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated" (v. 14).

As already noted, the statement is forceful, but still not greatly developed. The small horn, Antiochus and all he represents, will be

certainly and definitively destroyed, but "not by human power" (v. 25). That is, God himself will ultimately bring Antiochus down.

(6) God's people, downtrodden in the present, will experience new life in the fullest sense. "The sanctuary will be reconsecrated" (v. 14)—stated as a simple statement. When God defeats the forces of evil represented in Antiochus, it will result in a restoration of the temple.

The temple was more than a building; it was a symbol of God's presence with his people, hence a source of life and hope. Its desecration at the hands of Antiochus was an assault against God and cause for despair among the faithful. But the restoration of the temple meant a new life, the possibility of intense fellowship with God once again. We will see in chapter 12 that this too anticipates even greater realities than temple worship. There we learn that the faithful can hope for resurrection and a blessed eternal life in the presence of God beyond death itself.

Contemporary Significance

OUR STRATEGY FOR treating the major themes that echo throughout the second half of Daniel calls on us to treat the second one ("the announcement of a specific time of deliverance") here. For a treatment of the other five themes, consult the Contemporary Significance sections of chapters 7, 9, 10, 11, and 12.

Each unit in the apocalyptic section of Daniel contains some kind of chronological notice. In chapter 7, we learn that the saints will be handed over to the climactic king for "a time, times and half a time" (7:25). In chapter 9, we get the infamous "seventy weeks of years" (9:25–27). In chapter 12 (chs. 10–12 is a single unit), we read the enigmatic statement that the time between the abolishment of the sacrifice and the setting up of the abomination of desolation will be "1,290 days," followed by the even more enigmatic statement, "Blessed is the one who waits for and reaches the end of the 1,335 days" (12:11–12). While each of these passages will be treated in its own contexts, here we discuss the general issue of how these passages apply to us today.

Numbers in apocalyptic literature. Daniel is not the only apocalyptic book that contains provocative calendrical numbers. Most notable is the controversial reference in Revelation 20:3 to the thousand-year binding of

Satan. The debate over this passage has caused debate among sincere Christians for many years. Is it to be understood as a literal millennium to begin at some date in the future, or is it a symbolic number standing for the period of time between the first and second coming of Christ? These two camps are known as amillennialism and premillennialism.

Our comments will have ramifications for this debate, though we will not address it directly. Our concern here is to inquire what effect Daniel's chronological statements are supposed to have on us living on the eve of the third millennium A.D.? Are they pointers to the date of the return of Christ or do they intend to communicate another message to us?

Date-setting the Return. It is important to address this issue at the present time because the press is filled with reports that apocalyptic speculation is on the rise because of the shift of millennium. Further, the church is constantly bombarded with claims that someone has finally figured out the difficult apocalyptic numbers and has determined that we are living in the period of the end. We hear often that there is only a limited amount of time before Christ returns and history will come to a dramatic end, which is usually characterized as a period of violence.

In early 1994, I debated Harold Camping of Family Radio. Mr. Camping had faithfully been teaching the Bible virtually every night for the past thirty years. He had built up a faithful following over those years by offering biblical teaching on many important theological and practical issues. While his teaching could be characterized as overly dogmatic on certain controversial issues like divorce, he did not have a reputation for the sensational. In addition, he was an advocate of Reformed theology, from which school of thought usually emanated rather reserved teaching about the end times. Thus, when he published a book in 1993 in which he claimed to be able to unseal (Dan. 8:26; 12:9) the apocalyptic teaching about the time of the return of Christ, it generated a furor in churches not used to such speculation.²⁰

At the time I was teaching a seminar on "How to Interpret Prophecy" with Ray Dillard, my colleague at Westminster Theological Seminary. After the publication of Camping's book, we started to get a lot of anxious questions about the validity of his claims. Moreover, people in my own church became intrigued and a few even were persuaded by his arguments that Christ was going to return in September 1994.

It quickly became obvious to me that this was more than an interpretive debate. It had a dramatic effect on people's lives. One person I know drove his credit card balance to the max and got into serious financial trouble. His response? "Who cares! In a few months, Christ is coming again, so I don't have to worry about not paying my bills." Another friend was having serious marital problems. His wife had left him and the children. When I went on a pastoral call to visit him, I asked him if he had made any attempts to speak to his wife about their problems. His response? "No, I don't need to. In a matter of months, Christ is coming again and my problems will disappear." These are just two of the horror stories that I heard over the months preceding September 1994 from those who were persuaded that Mr. Camping had found the key to the difficult chronological notices in the apocalyptic teaching of the Bible, including Daniel.

When I debated Mr. Camping, it was May 1994, about four months from the date he had put forward as the time Christ would return. When I arrived at the location for the debate, I was completely floored. I was used to doing seminars on the Bible and getting good-sized groups of people interested to learn more about principles for interpreting prophecy, but I was not prepared for the huge group that had assembled to hear a discussion with the man who said that he had the date for the return of Christ figured out.

Of course, I could understand that Christians would be vitally interested in when their Lord was going to return again to "wipe away every tear" (Rev. 7:17; cf. 21:4), but didn't they know that the Jesus they were expecting also taught clearly, "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, not the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13:32)? How could some man or woman claim to know what Jesus himself said was hidden from him?

In one sense I was surprised, but in another I was not. I am, of course, using Mr. Camping as an example of a phenomenon that has happened again and again throughout church history. Countless claims have been made that someone has figured out that the Bible teaches an exact time for Christ's return. As a matter of fact, one scholar's research has numbered over two hundred such claims since 1945 alone!²¹ Thus, my anecdote must not be taken as a critique of Mr. Camping alone but of the whole enterprise of using apocalyptic as a tool for figuring out when Christ is coming again.

Date-setting is not an appropriate contemporary use of apocalyptic literature. That is the burden of my argument in this section.

Misuses of apocalyptic. Before continuing with my argument, let me point out that there are two misuses of apocalyptic in this way. (1) Mr. Camping represents the claim that one can use the Bible's apocalyptic chronology as a calendar to argue for a precise date for Christ's return. In answer to my challenge based on Mark 13:32, Mr. Camping coolly responded, "I don't know the day or the hour, I know the month and the year." This statement, of course, is a complete misunderstanding of Jesus' intention in that verse.

Now we might wrongly believe that this approach to the issue takes care of itself in the long run, and indeed it sometimes does—eventually. When I spoke to the group in May (which was mostly made up of his already convinced followers), I began by saying, "I know that I can't convince most of you today, but I want you to have something to think about in October." But when October came, Mr. Camping, in his radio broadcasts, while shaken, held out for the calendar year. When 1994 turned into 1995, he suddenly had the insight that the Bible meant the "Jewish year," which ended in the spring of 1995. When the second half of 1995 came, he cited the example of Jonah, who announced the demise of Nineveh only to have God spare that city. In other words, he wasn't wrong; God in his compassion for the lost just delayed his return.

Similar strategies of reinterpretation may be seen throughout history, perhaps most notably after the apparent failure of William Miller's prediction of Christ's return sometime during the Jewish year that ran from March 21, 1843 to March 21, 1844. When this date passed, a slight miscalculation was discovered, which led to a new date, October 22, 1844. There was tremendous disappointment when that date passed, but Miller's influence did not. Instead, a whole new movement developed from this Baptist minister's predictions. A group withdrew from the mainstream church to form another denomination, which we know today as the Adventist movement. Even today Adventist theologians argue that something important happened in 1843, a kind of anticipatory fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy in Daniel 9.²²

(2) But there is another type of misuse of these materials that must also be addressed. Only rarely does someone pick a precise date for the fulfillment of these chronological statements in Daniel and Revelation. The more typical pattern is the claim that the Bible teaches that, while we cannot pick a date, all the signs are pointing to the end within our lifetime. In our own time, the most well-known advocate of this reading of apocalyptic literature is Hal Lindsey.

As a senior in high school and not yet a believer, the first Christian book I ever read was Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Nowhere does the author pick a date. He wisely listens to Christ's teaching on that point. However, one cannot read his book without thinking that Christ must return before the mid–1970s. Everything was poised for the end of existence. Nuclear arsenals were just waiting for the button to be pressed. World food resources could not last more than a few more years. The environment would kill us before a few years were out. The end was near; the signs of the time were in full play.

This leads to an important issue. The Jesus who told us we could not know the day or the hour also told us to look for the signs of the time (cf. Mark 13). The latter days will be marked by earthquakes, wars and rumors of wars, false messiahs, and the appearance of the antichrist. When the gospel has been preached to all the nations, then we will be on the edge of the consummation. Such indications will alert us to the fact that Christ is about to return.

Perhaps of all the events in recent history that most make us think that our time is that special time has been the rebirth of the nation of Israel, the location of so many great redemptive events. I vividly remember my first visit to Israel in 1976, overlooking the Megiddo Valley (biblical Armageddon). The tour guide pointed out the military airfield below and commented on the fact that before the first generation of the new nation passed, the great final conflagration would take place right there in the valley below us. It is significant for me to think that the year I am writing these comments is the fiftieth anniversary of the birth of the nation of Israel, and most have understood the reference to a generation as being no more than fifty years.

But should the signs of the times be understood in this way? If so, what sense did it make for Jesus in the same breath to tell his followers (Mark 13:33–36):

Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: "Watch!"

To put it bluntly, why should they—why should we—watch unless we see the signs of the time?

But note that every generation has seen the signs of the time. This is why we are tempted, particularly when we have not listened to Jesus' clear teaching about not knowing the precise time, to think that our time is that special time.

I will not address every one of those signs,²³ but what age has not experienced earthquakes, wars, and rumors of wars? If there seem to be more wars and more earthquakes, could that not be because global communication is now possible and more immediate? What age has not recognized the Antichrist among them? After all, there are a lot of people, some of them satanically evil and powerful, who are "against Christ."²⁴ And what is the criterion for reaching every nation (or, as some argue, "people group")? Is it when one person, or more than 50 percent, or everyone in a nation/people group has heard? These are unanswerable questions.

The signs of the time do not intend to tell us that we are living in the shadow of Christ's return, but rather to remind us that we live in the last days, the days between the first and second coming of Christ. When we hear of an earthquake, we are not to say, "The time is nigh." Rather, we are to remind ourselves that we are still on this side of the consummation. We are to remind ourselves to be prepared, because Christ will appear "like a thief in the night" (1 Thess. 5:2).

That leads us back to the function of the highly symbolic numbers in Daniel and elsewhere, which are so difficult to figure out. Their purpose is not for date-setting but for comfort. They remind us that God knows what he is doing. God is sovereign and has set a limit on how long the present evil world will oppress us. These facts should comfort us by reminding us that God is in control of the situation.

I submit for our consideration that the misuse of these apocalyptic dates is an attempt to wrest control from God and place it firmly in our own sinful grasp. But the result is disruption in the church and in our lives. Such vain speculation leads, as in the case of the people I mentioned above, to a complete disregard for present realities. God calls us to live in the present while waiting with hope for the future.

Daniel 9:1-27

¹In the first year of Darius son of Xerxes (a Mede by descent), who was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom—²in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. ³So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.

⁴I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed:

"O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands, ⁵we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. ⁶We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our fathers, and to all the people of the land.

⁷"Lord, you are righteous, but this day we are covered with shame—the men of Judah and people of Jerusalem and all Israel, both near and far, in all the countries where you have scattered us because of our unfaithfulness to you. ⁸O LORD, we and our kings, our princes and our fathers are covered with shame because we have sinned against you. ⁹The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him; ¹⁰we have not obeyed the LORD our God or kept the laws he gave us through his servants the prophets. ¹¹All Israel has transgressed your law and turned away, refusing to obey you.

"Therefore the curses and sworn judgments written in the Law of Moses, the servant of God,

have been poured out on us, because we have sinned against you. ¹²You have fulfilled the words spoken against us and against our rulers by bringing upon us great disaster. Under the whole heaven nothing has ever been done like what has been done to Jerusalem. ¹³Just as it is written in the Law of Moses, all this disaster has come upon us, yet we have not sought the favor of the LORD our God by turning from our sins and giving attention to your truth. ¹⁴The LORD did not hesitate to bring the disaster upon us, for the LORD our God is righteous in everything he does; yet we have not obeyed him.

15"Now, O Lord our God, who brought your people out of Egypt with a mighty hand and who made for yourself a name that endures to this day, we have sinned, we have done wrong. ¹⁶O Lord, in keeping with all your righteous acts, turn away your anger and your wrath from Jerusalem, your city, your holy hill. Our sins and the iniquities of our fathers have made Jerusalem and your people an object of scorn to all those around us.

¹⁷"Now, our God, hear the prayers and petitions of your servant. For your sake, O Lord, look with favor on your desolate sanctuary. ¹⁸Give ear, O God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy. ¹⁹O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act! For your sake, O my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name."

²⁰While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel and making my request to the LORD my God for his holy hill—
²¹while I was still in prayer, Gabriel, the man I had seen in the earlier vision, came to me in swift flight

about the time of the evening sacrifice. ²²He instructed me and said to me, "Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding. ²³As soon as you began to pray, an answer was given, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed. Therefore, consider the message and understand the vision:

²⁴"Seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy.

²⁵"Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two 'sevens.' It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble. ²⁶After the sixty-two 'sevens,' the Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing. The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end will come like a flood: War will continue until the end, and desolations have been decreed. ²⁷He will confirm a covenant with many for one 'seven.' In the middle of the 'seven' he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on a wing of the temple he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him."

Original Meaning

DANIEL 9 BEGINS like the other chapters in its immediate context by announcing the time when the events described in it take place. It is the first year of Darius the Mede, the one whom we understand to be the ruler of Babylonia after the Persians defeated the native dynasty represented by Belshazzar. The year, then, is 539 B.C.

While the introduction to the chapter is familiar, its contents are unusual for the book. The immediate context is full of apocalyptic visions, yet here we encounter a prayer stimulated by Daniel's reading of Scripture. The prophet is reading the letter of Jeremiah and notes his declaration that the Exile will last seventy years. This insight leads him to turn to God with a prayer of confession.

Some scholars feel that the prayer fits awkwardly in its context.² However, such concerns arise only when one has a rigid view of the composition of a biblical book. That the apocalyptic visions are interrupted by a prayer is not at all illogical to the context. In fact, note that Daniel's prayer leads to the appearance of Gabriel, who answers his prayer with an explanation of the seventy years (vv. 20–27), which is a typical way in which numbers are treated in apocalyptic.

Some scholars insist, however, that the context, in which Daniel is struggling with the interpretation of Scripture, demands not the prayer of confession that appears in the chapter, but rather a prayer of illumination. After all, that is what Gabriel provides, an explanation of the Jeremiah passage. But again, Daniel knows that the end of the Exile does not come automatically; it requires confession and repentance. That is the intention of his prayer.

Other scholars feel that Daniel's confession represents a view of the suffering of the exiles that is alien to the book. It is true that the book in the main deals with the tribulations that the foreign oppressors were pressing on God's people. But a faithful Israelite like Daniel would know where the true blame of the Exile rested—not on Babylon, but on the rebellious people of God themselves. Indeed, we observed in the first few verses of the book that this Exile was not an autonomous act on the part of the godless Babylonians. God was behind the process that brought the Israelites under their control. This strongly implies an understanding that the Exile was the result of Israel's sin. Furthermore, Daniel is reading Jeremiah, the prophet who made it clear why the Babylonians won the day—Israel's breaking of the covenant.

Scholars often refer to the theology expressed in Daniel's prayer as Deuteronomic, that is, as reflecting the theology of Deuteronomy.³ This Old Testament book is in the form of a report about the covenant relationship between God and his people. A covenant is similar to a treaty.⁴ In simple

terms, God makes certain promises to his people, and in response they are to obey the laws he announces to them. Essential to a covenant are the blessings and curses: If God's people obey the laws God gives them, he will bless them with security, fertility, and prosperity (Deut. 28:1–14); but if they disobey the law—in particular, if they depart from the worship of the true God—they will be cursed with (among other things) oppression by enemies and exile. Typical is the curse in 28:64–68, a passage that clearly anticipates the Babylonian Exile:

Then the LORD will scatter you among all nations, from one end of the earth to the other. There you will worship other gods—gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known. Among those nations you will find no repose, no resting place for the sole of your foot. There the LORD will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life. In the morning you will say, "If only it were evening!" and in the evening, "If only it were morning!"—because of the terror that will fill your hearts and the sights that your eyes will see. The LORD will send you back in ships to Egypt on a journey I said you should never make again. There you will offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but no one will buy you.

From Daniel's perspective, centuries after the writing of Deuteronomy Israel suffered for having broken the covenant and were now experiencing the curses of the covenant.

But Daniel also realized that this was not the end of the story. God is merciful and forgiving. Indeed, in another relevant passage of Scripture, the formula for restoration is clearly put forth. First Kings 8 narrates the dedication of the newly built temple. At that time, Solomon offered a prayer in which he recognized that a time might come when Israel's sin would lead to their defeat at the hands of an enemy (1 Kings 8:33–34, 46–51):

When your people Israel have been defeated by an enemy because they have sinned against you, and when they turn back to you and confess your name, praying and making supplication to you in this temple, then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your people Israel and bring them back to the land you gave to their fathers....

When they sin against you—for there is no one who does not sin—and you become angry with them and give them over to the enemy, who takes them captive to his own land, far away or near; and if they have a change of heart in the land where they are held captive, and repent and plead with you in the land of their conquerors and say, "We have sinned, we have done wrong, we have acted wickedly"; and if they turn back to you with all their heart and soul in the land of their enemies who took them captive, and pray to you toward the land you gave their fathers, toward the city you have chosen and the temple I have built for your Name; then from heaven, your dwelling place, hear their prayer and their pleas, and uphold their cause. And forgive your people, who have sinned against you; forgive all the offenses they have committed against you, and cause their conquerors to show them mercy; for they are your people and your inheritance, whom you brought out of Egypt, out of that iron-smelting furnace.

Solomon is here reflecting the theology of Deuteronomy. Daniel does not cite Solomon's prayer; he may not even be thinking of it, but he certainly reflects its theology. In this sense, Daniel represents a Deuteronomic theology. And what else would we expect? Daniel's thinking is founded on God's revelation, which includes Deuteronomy, Kings, and Jeremiah.

Interest in this chapter has usually bypassed the prayer for the more enigmatic prophecy of the seventy weeks. This is unfortunate, for the prayer contains much rich theology and important practical application to those of us reading it today. The seventy weeks has amassed an incredible bibliography and a bewildering array of interpretations. We will do our best to cut through the maze to get at the heart of the teaching of that passage without getting bogged down in esoterica.

Our discussion of the chapter will be divided into five parts: (1) Preparation for prayer (9:1–4a); (2) invocation and confession (9:4b–10); (3) God's punishment (9:11–14); (4) appeal for mercy (9:15–19); (5) the prophecy of the seventy weeks (9:20–27).

Preparation for Prayer (9:1–4a)

As IS TYPICAL of the book of Daniel, the chapter begins with a chronological notice. It is the first year of Darius, "who was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom" (v. 1). This Darius had forcibly replaced Belshazzar (coregent of Nabonidus) on the throne and was likely a subordinate ruler of Cyrus of Persia (for an extended discussion of the question of the identity of Darius the Mede, see comments on ch. 6).

The significance of the mention of Darius's first year (539 B.C.) was that this was the year in which the Persians defeated the Babylonians, whose empire, under Nebuchadnezzar, had defeated and exiled Judah some decades before. Darius's first year as king of Babylon would have coincided with the first year of Cyrus as the great king of the Persian empire—also the year, therefore, that witnessed the decree to allow some Judeans to return to their homeland.

Daniel's prayer seems to have taken place in anticipation of this decree. His witness to the fall of Babylon may have caused him to turn to the Scriptures with new eyes.

Rarely do we see such an explicit reference from one biblical book to another as we see here with Daniel's appeal to Jeremiah. Some scholars are unwilling to speak of a closed prophetic canon or an authoritative Scripture at this point,⁵ but it is certainly hard to avoid the implication of the latter. What Jeremiah has written, after all, is referred to as the "word of the LORD." Here we see the equation between the prophet's words and the word of the one who commissioned him. Reading Jeremiah's words sets off Daniel's passionate appeal in verses 4–19.

But what did Daniel read in Jeremiah? Though verse numbers are not given, Daniel certainly had passages like Jeremiah 25:11–12; 29:10 in mind:

This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

"But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians, for their guilt," declares the LORD, "and will make it desolate forever."

This is what the LORD says, "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place."

In essence these passages teach that the king of Babylon will dominate the ancient Near East (including Judah) for seventy years, after which time Babylon itself will come to an end. In the first year of Darius, Babylon has come to an end as a world power, being replaced by Persia. Daniel recognizes this as the time when the Exile may come to an end.

Note that seventy years, counting backward from 539, is 609 B.C. What happened in 609? As far as Judah and the Exile is concerned—nothing.⁶ The first incursion we know about is the one mentioned in Daniel 1:1–2, dated to around 605 B.C. Is seventy years a round number for the period of 605 to 539? Perhaps. However, seventy also suggests a symbolic number being seven multiplied by ten, two numbers of completeness.⁷ Seventy may also be seen as the approximate or symbolic number for a lifetime.⁸

The interpretation of this number becomes even more complex, however, when we examine two later biblical books as they reflect on Jeremiah's prophecy of seventy years of exile. (1) 2 Chronicles 36:20–22 also refers to Jeremiah's seventy years. The Chronicler draws an interesting connection to the Sabbath rests of the land. Leviticus 25:1–7 and 26:31–35, 43 command the Israelites to allow their land to rest every seven years, which apparently they rarely, if ever, did. He then interprets the Exile as a divinely imposed period to make up for the seventy missed sabbatical years. But more telling for our interpretation of Daniel 9, it appears as if the Chronicler understood the seventy years to begin in 586 B.C., the year in which Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the temple and completed the deportation process. He also

understood the Exile to end in 539 B.C. with Cyrus's decree, thus clearly taking the number symbolically.

(2) The other relevant passage is Zechariah 1:12, where the prophet reports the plaintive cry of an angel who asks: "How long will you withhold mercy from Jerusalem and from the towns of Judah, which you have been angry with these seventy years?" According to Zechariah the seventy years are apparently still in process in 519 B.C. (the second year of a later Darius).

When we compare these passages and reflect on the number itself, we reach the conclusion that the number is not literal, nor even referring to one specific period of time. This should not concern us; it is the predominant way in which numbers are used in apocalyptic. The recognition of this fact should also prepare us for the even more extravagant use of numbers later in the chapter.

In any case, it is with a scripturally inspired sense that the Exile is coming to a close that Daniel turns to the Lord in prayer. It is significant that only in the context of this prayer is the covenant name Yahweh ("LORD" in NIV) used. This is appropriate in a prayer that appeals to God's covenant promises to forgive and restore his people on the basis of their confession.

Daniel's preparation for prayer indicates the kind of prayer that will follow. He fasts and puts on sackcloth and ashes, all of which are actions that indicate his deep sorrow and grief. Towner is right to identify the following prayer as a "prose prayer of penitence" and to cite its close connections with prayers found in Ezra 9:6–15; Nehemiah 1:5–11 and 9:6–37. They are "all penitential in character and all containing elements of ascription, confession, and petition."

Invocation and Confession (9:4b–10)

THE PRAYER BEGINS by calling on God's name. Indeed, it paints a powerful picture of the Lord, especially in contrast to his people. Daniel acknowledges him as "great and awesome" as well as faithful to the covenant. The latter is most to the point of the prayer. As explained above, the theology of this chapter is based on the theology of the covenant, particularly the Mosaic covenant as recorded in Deuteronomy. Daniel appeals to God as the one who keeps his covenant with all who obey the laws associated with that covenant. He characterizes the covenant as a

"covenant of love." The word here translated "love" is the rich term *ḥesed*, which is the affection that leads to covenant faithfulness on God's part. He does not quickly punish his people, and he stands ready to bless them when they obey his laws.

However, Daniel confesses that God's people have not obeyed his commands, but have rebelled against him instead. They have not listened to the warnings of the prophets who were sent to God's people to get them to change their attitudes and behavior to conform to God's will. The prophets are like the lawyers of the covenant. When the covenant is broken, they appear in order to accuse the people with the ultimate intention of restoring their love and fidelity to God. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and many others were used by God to carry the message of warning and repentance, but they went largely unheeded.

The prophets were sent, according to Daniel, to all strata of society—from kings to common people. None of them, however, responded. Rather, they persisted in their foolish and dangerous rebellion. In the next few verses of the confession, Daniel marks a contrast between the sin of the people and the mercy of God. God is faithful; his people are rebellious. The prophet is brutally honest in his acknowledgment of the responsibility of God's people for their present dire condition. They are in exile because they have rebelled against the covenant God made with them through Moses.

God's Punishment (9:11–14)

In the Next section of his prayer, Daniel draws a direct connection between the sin of the people and their present suffering. We cited above two of the curses Daniel has in mind, but there are more (see Deut. 27–28). Between the Law of Moses and the Prophets, God's people had no excuse. They knew what the consequences of their actions would be. But somehow they rationalized it. Perhaps they grew presumptuous because of God's long patience with them. They would sin without immediate punishment, so they began to doubt that God would really follow through with his threats. Jeremiah 7:1–29, the so-called "temple sermon" of Jeremiah, charges Israel with presumption because of the presence of the temple in the city. They wrongly reasoned that if God's residence was the temple, there would be no way that an enemy, even one as mighty as Babylon, could defeat their city.

They were safe as long as God lived in Jerusalem, and since the temple was immovable, they were safe forever.

What they did not consider was the possibility that God would abandon his temple (Ezek. 9–11). They further did not reckon with the possibility God himself would turn against them and lead the Babylonian army into the streets of Jerusalem (Jer. 21:3–7). Indeed, the horror of the resulting destruction of Jerusalem reverberates through the biblical literature of the exilic period, as seen in Lamentations 2:2–5:

Without pity the Lord has swallowed up all the dwellings of Jacob; in his wrath he has torn down the strongholds of the Daughter of Judah. He has brought her kingdom and its princes down to the ground in dishonor. In fierce anger he has cut off every horn of Israel. He has withdrawn his right hand at the approach of the enemy. He has burned in Jacob like a flaming fire that consumes everything around it. Like an enemy he has strung his bow; his right hand is ready. Like a foe he has slain all who were pleasing to the eye; he has poured out his wrath like fire on the tent of the Daughter of Zion. The Lord is like an enemy; he has swallowed up Israel. He has swallowed up all her palaces and destroyed her strongholds. He has multiplied mourning and lamentation for the Daughter of Judah.

The description in Lamentations goes on and on; we cannot fathom the horror that the faithful felt at the destruction of their beloved city and their

temple.

Though horrible, however, Daniel does acknowledge again that God was right in what he had done. The destruction of Jerusalem and the Exile of Judah were not acts of an arbitrary God, but rather the consequences of the sinful attitudes and actions of God's people, about which they were repeatedly warned.

Appeal for Mercy (9:15–19)

Daniel has been praying not just on his own behalf, but as the representative of the people. He has not confessed his own sins, but rather the sins of the nation. From that foundation, he now asks God to show mercy to his people and restore the destroyed city. We noted above from 1 Kings 8 that restoration was possible after divine punishment, but it required this kind of acknowledgment of responsibility on the part of the people.

Here the prophet calls on God as the One who delivered his people out of Egypt. The Exodus was a pivotal event in the life of God's people. It defined them as a nation. Through it, God freed them from slavery and brought them into the Promised Land. The prophets before Daniel saw an analogy between the Exodus and the future deliverance that would free them from the shackles of the Exile (cf. Isa. 40:3–5; Hos. 2:14–15). In essence, the return from the Exile would be a sort of second Exodus.

Though the plea for God's mercy follows the confession and could not proceed without it, it is wrong to think that the confession is the basis of God's restoration. Daniel knows that the people are still sinful and if there is any hope for them, it is in God's righteousness and not their own (vv. 16, 18). Daniel's appeal is ultimately based not on the people's plight but on the reputation of God himself.

The Prophecy of the Seventy Weeks (9:20–27)

Daniel's prayer gives the impression of completeness, ending as it does with an impassioned plea for God to hear the prayer and forgive his people without delay (v. 19). The prophet is still in a prayerful frame of mind, perhaps continuing with urgent appeals to God to answer the prayer, when he is suddenly interrupted by Gabriel, the angel who interpreted the vision

of the previous chapter. Gabriel may well have had the task of interpreter among the angels of the Lord.

We must remember that Daniel's prayer for forgiveness and restoration was motivated by his reading of Jeremiah's prophecy that the Exile would last seventy years. Gabriel's answer to Daniel's prayer is an interpretation of the seventy years in a way that seems to extend its purview. Gabriel apparently suggests that the end of the seventy-year exile begins a process, one that will last for seventy "sevens," or weeks of years—usually understood as 490 years.

We will begin our exploration of Gabriel's speech by paraphrasing it without attempting to relate it to the future or historical events. Daniel has prayed for forgiveness and restoration, and Gabriel now communicates the heavenly answer by reinterpreting the seventy years as seventy "sevens." During this period six actions will be completed: (1) the finishing of transgression, (2) the end of sin, (3) the atonement of the wicked, (4) the bringing in of everlasting righteousness, (5) the sealing up of vision and prophecy, and (6) the anointing of the most holy (v. 24). The accomplishment of these six actions certainly sounds like an answer to Daniel's prayer, but they are being pushed off to the future (the force of the seventy "sevens" to be explained below). They are, in the words of J. J. Collins, an "eschatological ideal."

The first two actions describe the end of sin, presumably on the part of God's people; after all, that was what Daniel's prayer called for. However, it may also encompass the sins of all people, including the sins of the nations described as beasts in chapters 7 and 8. The third action, "to atone for wickedness," emphasizes the theme of the first two, the eradication of sin. But whereas the first two simply describe the cessation of sinful activity, this third action implies that God removes the consequences of already committed sinful behavior.

While the first three actions describe the eradication of the negative, the next three are more positive in focus. The first is clearly positive, though of a general nature and hard to specify: The completion of the seventy sevens will see the introduction of "everlasting righteousness." The second, the sealing of vision and prophecy, is sometimes misunderstood as a sealing away. But sealing in its ancient context is better understood as a mark of approval, an authentication of the prophetic word. Perhaps in this context it

implies the act of authentication, that is, the ultimate fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy. The last, and perhaps the culmination of the six actions, is the anointing of "the most holy." Some take the reference as pointing to the temple and its cleansing by the Maccabean rebels after being profaned by Antiochus Epiphanes in the middle of the second century B.C. Another ancient tradition, however, takes the reference not to a place but to a person—the Messiah.

These six actions take place during the entire period of seventy "sevens." They describe the eradication of evil and the establishment of righteousness. In the present, Daniel and his companions know an imperfect world, but in the future things will be wonderful.

Far from concluding his speech, Gabriel continues by taking a more nuanced look at the seventy "sevens." He divides the period into parts, charting a kind of forward-looking history of the seventy "sevens." In essence, he divides the entire period into three parts (vv. 25–27). (1) The first seven "sevens" and (2) the next sixty-two "sevens" are in one sense treated as a single unit—though in another obvious way as two—and encompass the period between the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem and the coming of "the Anointed One." We are already used to this enigmatic way of referring to future time periods, so we are not surprised at the questions that arise from these numbers. Why exactly is the first seven "sevens" separated from the next sixty-two? Apparently, we are to think of that shorter period as having a kind of integrity of its own, but what marks its ending point? Which decree of many that we know about is in Gabriel's mind? Who is "the Anointed One"? We will address these questions below.

With the phrase "streets and a trench" (v. 25a) the passage intends to communicate that Jerusalem will be completely restored and that this restoration will take place in an atmosphere of "trouble" (v. 25b).

The end of the sixty-nine "seven's" (the combination of the two first periods) marks a turbulent time. Again, the language is enigmatic. The Anointed One will be cut off, and the "people of the ruler" will destroy the "city and the sanctuary" (v. 26). The devastation will be complete and perhaps quick since it is compared to a flood. It will be a time of war and desolation.

(3) The last "seven," the seventieth, is itself divided in the middle and, far from clearing things up, continues the enigma. In the first place, the

action of the seventieth week emanates from a single individual, who is simply referred to as "he." The closest antecedent is the "ruler" (nagid) of verse 26. The latter's relationship to the Anointed One is unclear and, as we will see, debated. Are they the same? After all, in verse 25 it is clear that the "Anointed One" is called the ruler (nagid), but the ruler in verse 26 is associated with destructive actions; and most Christian interpretations understand the Anointed One in a positive manner.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the actions of the seventieth week are the work of a destructive force. The unspecified "he" confirms a covenant for one "seven," presumably the seventieth, but in the middle of it he cuts off sacrifice and offering. While it may be possible to construe the latter in some way as positive, the erection of "an abomination that causes desolation" clearly is not. The period of the prophecy ends with the end of this disruptive person. In the next section, we will delve further, but with great caution, into the morass of interpretations of this enigmatic oracle.

Bridging Contexts

Daniel 9 Begins with Scripture reading, which leads to prayer that results in divine revelation. Daniel's reading of Jeremiah's letter moves him to acknowledge and ask forgiveness for the sins of God's people. The prayer, in turn, brings Gabriel to Daniel with a message from God.

The relationship between God's Word and prayer. Before turning our focus to the content of the prayer and revelation, let's pause for a moment on the dynamic of Daniel's communication with God. We get a rare Old Testament glimpse of Scripture reading in relationship to prayer. How do human beings communicate with God? Daniel 9 provides an illustration. God speaks to us through the words of his representatives, the prophets—in this case the writings of Jeremiah. Though dead and gone by this time, Jeremiah's written word still speaks God's word to his people. Daniel hears God's words in Jeremiah and responds through prayer. God then sends Gabriel with yet further revelation.

The principle is clear, though its contemporary application awaits the next section: God speaks to his people in his written and spoken Word. This principle is simple on the surface, but is really at the heart of biblical religion and contrasts with modern ideas of Christianity. Since the

nineteenth-century philosophers Feuerbach and Nietzsche, it has commonly been believed that the God of Christianity is the product of human imagination. Human beings desire a God, so they have constructed him in their own image. The Bible, however, claims to be the revelation of God to human beings. God uses human language to make his existence and nature known to us. In the Bible, he makes his will known to his people. Daniel understands this as he meditates on Jeremiah's letter.

The six themes of Daniel 7–12, reviewed. While the form of Daniel 9— a prayer of repentance—is unique to its context, the surrounding chapters focus on apocalyptic visions of the future, whose content, especially when the divine revelation at the end is taken into account, shares themes with the preceding and following chapters. In the section "The Nature of Apocalyptic Literature" in the Original Meaning section of chapter 7, we identified the six themes that reverberate throughout the second half of the book of Daniel, together supporting the overarching thesis of the book of Daniel: *In spite of present appearances, God is in control and will win the victory.*

- (1) Human evil is horrible, particularly as it is concentrated in the state. This theme has certainly been in the forefront of the previous two chapters. 9 sees a shift of focus that has attracted the attention of previous interpreters. Throughout Daniel, the pagan nations, like Babylonia and Persia, have been seen as renegades from God. In Daniel's prayer, Israel too is named as rebel and transgressor. The suffering of God's people is ultimately the result of their own sin.
- (2) A specific time of deliverance is announced. Gabriel's response to Daniel's prayer is an extended announcement of the time of deliverance. As we discussed at length in the previous chapter, the numbers given in reference to the time of the fulfillment of prophecy or the end are wrongly understood as a kind of apocalyptic calendar. They rather give the sense of a definite end to suffering, a time known and determined by God himself and not revealed to human beings. The numbers are ultimately symbolic and impossible of conversion to an absolute date.

In our interpretation of the "seventy 'sevens" in the preceding section, we noted the futile search for an interpretation of these numbers to fit with our understanding of history. Attempts to correlate these years, understood as 490 years, with the date of Antiochus Epiphanes, Jesus Christ's first

- coming, his second coming, or any of the countless other special redemptive events that have caught interpreters' attention, have been unpersuasive to any but a few devoted followers. Such futile efforts work against the purpose of these texts, which is to point to God's determined timing of the end of sin and suffering without revealing the exact timing.
- (3) Repentance leads to deliverance. Evil is the result of resisting the way of God. Sin produces suffering. God is revealed as a holy God in this book, who judges those who sin. But he is also a gracious God, who forgives those who come to him and confess their sins. Acknowledgment of sin and confession—in a word, repentance—leads to deliverance or restoration. This theme has been earmarked for special discussion in this chapter; we will reserve further comment until we finish our survey of the six themes.
- (4) A cosmic war stands behind human conflict. This theme takes on major proportions in Daniel 10, but even here we get a glimpse of the supernatural universe that lies behind human history. Daniel prays to God, who in response sends an angel with his answer. In the next chapter we will see that these angels, even as they come with answers to prayer, are involved in a conflict with other supernatural powers (see comments on ch. 10).
- (5) Judgment is certain for those who resist God and oppress his people. Even though the evil of God's people is stressed in Daniel 9, the evil power that oppresses them does not escape condemnation and judgment. As we have commented above, the language of the "seventy 'sevens'" is difficult, and at times even the basic characters of the prophecy are unclear. However, no doubt attends the revelation that the period of time culminates in the destruction of the final embodiment of evil, who sets up "an abomination that causes desolation" (9:27). God wins out in the end.
- (6) Equally true is the fact that God's people, downtrodden in the present, will experience new life in the fullest sense. Daniel's prayer describes the covenant people as sinful and distant from God. Their sin has resulted in the judgment of the Exile. His prayer, however, is motivated by the hope of restoration that Jeremiah's prophecy instilled in his heart. He longs for that time of deliverance. It is with a message of life that Gabriel comes to Daniel. We have seen under the previous point that the message includes punishment for those who resist God to the end, but it also talks about the restoration of God's people. The "seventy 'sevens,'" after all, have as their

purpose "to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy."

Repentance and forgiveness. We have reserved chapter 9 for a fuller discussion of the third important theme of the last half of Daniel: repentance that leads to deliverance. Daniel prays a prayer of confession that apologizes for the past sins of his people, with the hope that God will hear his prayer and begin the process of forgiveness and reconciliation. In this section, we will explore more deeply the theological dynamics that fueled Daniel's hope.

At the heart of Daniel's prayer stands one of the most potent and pervasive theological themes of the Old Testament: the covenant. Its sudden appearance in Daniel 9 has led some commentators, as we have seen, to question whether Daniel's prayer is a foreign intrusion into the book. However, the covenant is such an important concept among the Old Testament people of God of whatever period that it is more surprising when it is absent. It is so pervasive an idea that it often lurks in the background, surfacing only at strategic moments. Daniel 9 is such a strategic moment.

The apocalyptic visions of the latter half of this book envision a deliverance for God's people from the oppression that began with Nebuchadnezzar's incursion into Judah (see 1:1–2). Israel's culpability for this turn of events is strongly implied in the language used there for the process of domination and exile that began at that moment "the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand." Behind this simple statement stands the judgment of God, based on the curses of the covenant.

We will first explain the concept of *covenant* more carefully—an English word often used to translate the Hebrew word b^erit . This word is not a part of our everyday vocabulary, but it still has a vital life as a legal term. It is a legal expression for a relationship where commitments are made and sanctioned by law, which have the force of penalties for noncompliance. In many ways, *covenant* is a good translation equivalent for the biblical idea. More recent evidence from the ancient Near East, however, allows us to understand this legal term more precisely. The legal relationship is best recognized as a political treaty. In other words, in the covenant/treaty God is the Great King, who enters into a political treaty with his servant people Israel.

This understanding was reached by the awareness that certain key texts describing the covenant relationship between God and Israel bear a similar structure and reveal similar content to ancient Near Eastern treaties, particularly those found in the Hittite capital of Boghazkoi. This structure illuminates the theological principle at work in Daniel 9. As we describe the six parts of a covenant/treaty document, we will illustrate them from the book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy is not a treaty per se, but rather a sermon that describes the treaty relationship. Thus, it follows the outline only roughly, yet close enough to see that the concept is fairly applied to Deuteronomy. Using this biblical book as our paradigm covenant has the further advantage that the Mosaic covenant is the one that lies most directly behind Daniel's prayer.

The book of Deuteronomy follows the typical pattern of a treaty between the king of a powerful nation and the king of a relatively modest nation. This type of relationship is called a vassal treaty (as opposed to a treaty of equals, called a parity treaty) and has at least six standard elements:

- *Introduction*. An ancient Near Eastern vassal treaty began with the introduction of the two parties involved. In Deuteronomy 1 we do not have the actual treaty document, but we have an account of the ritual that affirms it. Clearly the two parties are God, who is the Great King, and the people of Israel, who are his servant people (Deut. 1:1–5).
- *Historical review.* An ancient treaty often began with a review of the history of the relationship between the two parties. In secular treaties, the great king would lay it on thick by telling the vassal king how wonderful he had been to the weaker nation and how ungrateful the other king had been to him. In Deuteronomy, of course, the historical remembrance is more than manipulative political ideology. It is the truth. God has been overwhelmingly gracious to Israel. From the Red Sea crossing to the moment forty years later when they stand poised to enter the Promised Land, God has taken care of his people (Deut. 1:9–3:27).

• Law-giving. After the gracious relationship between God and Israel has been firmly established, God gives them the law. This, too, follows the pattern of the ancient Near Eastern treaties, in which the present obligations of the law sprang from the relationship of the past. In Deuteronomy, though not in all biblical covenants, the law takes up the lion's share of the content (Deut. 4:1–26:19). Perhaps the reason for this is Moses' concern that Israel has been so disobedient in the desert.

The important theological point is that God delivers the law only after he has established his relationship with Israel. His law is not the cause of the relationship but the way in which the relationship will be continued and enriched. This is what we mean by saying the laws come in the context of grace. To make sure that Israel gets its priorities straight, the Ten Commandments begin with this reminder, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Deut. 5:6; cf. Ex. 20:2). God has graciously acted on their behalf, prior to anything they can do to earn his benevolence.

• Rewards and consequences. Next Deuteronomy stipulates consequences for disobedience. In ancient Near Eastern treaties, the great king would inform the wonderful rewards vassal that would obedience to his laws, while punishment would surely reach the one who disobeyed. In a similar manner, conditions are attached to Israel's response —either blessings or curses (Deut. 27:1–28:68). These blessings and curses make their presence felt throughout the canon of the Old Testament. Samuel and Kings in particular view the Exile as a result of breaking the laws of Deuteronomy, which has thus brought on the dreaded curses. Deuteronomy 28:64 is an ominous anticipation of that horrible period of

- Israel's history when God promises disobedient Israel that he will "scatter [them] among all nations."
- *Witnesses*. A treaty, being at heart a legal document, needs witnesses. In the ancient Near Eastern treaties, the gods and goddesses of the respective nations often served in this capacity. For Israel, the witness is God's creation, heaven and earth itself (Deut. 30:19–20).
- Review and succession. To complete the picture of the treaty or covenant in Old Testament times, we must mention the concern for the treaty text itself (e.g., where it should be placed) and for a regular reading of the document, as well as the provision for the succession of kings, especially in the vassal country. Treaties looked beyond the present to the future. Scribes made two copies of the treaty and usually placed them in the most important temples of the two nations entering the relationship.

This procedure wasn't necessary in the divine-human covenant, though it has been suggested that the two tablets of the law are actually two copies. In either case, the law is written and placed in the most sacred spot possible—the ark of the covenant. Every seven years, during the Feast of the Tabernacles, the priests are to read the law so the people can reaffirm their allegiance to it (Deut. 31:9–13).

In other words, the covenant provides the reason why the Israelites are suffering at the hands of the Babylonians. They have broken the law and are suffering the consequences of the curses, which includes removal from the Promised Land and exile to a foreign land. A prime example from the curse section of the book of Deuteronomy (28:64–68) is quoted above. But that is not the end of the story. Also quoted above is 1 Kings 8:46–51, which talks about the possibility of restoration. This hope also grows from the book of Deuteronomy, which envisions in 30:1–10 a time when the sins of the people have triggered the curses of the covenant. However, thanks to God's grace, the story does not end for God's people at that point:

When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back. He will bring you to the land that belonged to your fathers, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live. The LORD your God will put all these curses on your enemies who hate and persecute you. You will again obey the LORD and follow all his commands I am giving you today. Then the LORD your God will make you most prosperous in all the work of your hands and in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your land. The LORD will again delight in you and make you prosperous, just as he delighted in your fathers, if you obey the LORD your God and keep his commands and decrees that are written in this Book of the Law and turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

Daniel's prayer is founded on the Deuteronomic covenant. He understands the present situation as the result of the breaking of the law and the consequent curses. But he also understands that the road to recovery is through repentance, which involves full acknowledgment of past transgression. There is no "forgive and forget" without confession here or anywhere in the Bible. Notice too that nowhere do we get the slightest

evidence that Daniel has personally participated in the sins that led to the people's present condition. Yet he does not say, "Forgive them, Lord." Rather, he identifies with the people and cries out, "We have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws" (Dan. 9:5).

On the basis of a covenant relationship, Daniel turns to the Lord and confesses the sins of the people and includes himself among them. He acknowledges God's righteousness in the Exile, but also turns to the Lord with the hope of repentance. Repentance is the road to reconciliation.

Contemporary Significance

HEARING GOD'S VOICE today. Daniel turned to the writings of Jeremiah to hear the voice of God. Here he heard God speak to him and the nation, and it motivated his response of prayer and repentance. God then spoke to him further through the agency of Gabriel, an angel. Where do we go to hear God speak today? Where does God reveal himself to us? The opening verses of the book of Hebrews (1:1–4) points us in the right direction:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

Jesus is God's fullest revelation of himself to us. He is God in human form. Where do we meet God in Jesus today? Most directly in the Bible. We should listen to Paul's well-known advice to Timothy (2 Tim. 3:14–16):

Continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

The difference between the time of Daniel and our own time is that we have a completed canon, Old and New Testament, which reveals God to us. We can see the pattern of God's progressive revelation as it tells the story of redemption that culminates in Jesus Christ. That is why we insist on ultimately reading the Old Testament through the light of the New Testament. It is one Word of God, which culminates in the New. The brighter light of the New Testament often helps us see the Old Testament more clearly.

However, as we have done in this commentary, it is essential first to consider the teaching of the Old Testament on its own grounds first. We must ask the question what the original audience understood before we can legitimately push forward to the New Testament. Otherwise, we risk the danger of reading into the Old Testament what is not there or missing important elements of its teaching.

The new covenant in Jesus. As we bridge the horizon to the fuller revelation of the New Testament in Daniel 9, we first of all notice that the foundational concept of the covenant reaches its culmination in the teaching of Jesus. Daniel looked back to the Mosaic covenant, while Jesus speaks of a new covenant.

At the end of his life, just before going to the cross, Jesus shared a last meal with his disciples, at which he introduced a ritual we know as the "Lord's Supper" or "communion." This ritual is described in the following words in Matthew 26:26–30:

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying,

"Take and eat; this is my body."

Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom."

When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Jesus thus seals a covenant with his twelve disciples. This should remind us of God's covenant dealings in the Old Testament. As a matter of fact, Luke adds the word "new" before "covenant" (Luke 22:20), making an explicit connection with Jeremiah 31:31–33. Jesus' language signifies continuity and discontinuity in the idea of the covenant as we move from the Old to the New Testament, and Jeremiah's prophecy is an important transitional statement.

Jeremiah, as we have already seen, not only told the people about their coming punishment based on their breaking of the covenant law, but he also gave them the hope that their punishment would lead to their repentance and to the rescue of the remnant. The most notable instance of this is in the so-called Book of Consolation. Jeremiah 31:31–34 is at the heart of God's message of hope:

"The time is coming," declares the LORD,
"when I will make a new covenant
with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah.
It will not be like the covenant
I made with their forefathers
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,"

declares the LORD.

"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel

after that time," declares the LORD.

"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God and they will be my people.

No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, "Know the LORD," because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,"

declares the LORD.

Here we see a bridge between the Old Testament and the New, but one that suggests that there is both continuity and discontinuity. It is a covenant that has its foundations in the Old Testament covenants, but in some sense it is new.

What is new (i.e., what discontinuity is there) between the old covenant and the new? O. P. Robertson is correct to locate the necessity of discontinuity in the failure not of God or his covenant, but with the people. "The expulsion of the people of God from the land of promise at the time of the exile dramatizes their massive failure under the old covenant." According to Jeremiah, the new covenant is internal, immediate, and intimate in comparison to the old covenant. These differences are not a difference in kind as much as in degree. It is perhaps more precise to say that the new covenant is *more* internal, immediate, and intimate than the old.

The passage from Jeremiah 31 just quoted indicates that the new covenant "boasts a unique feature in its power to transform its participants from within their hearts." Further, there is no need for a teacher in the new covenant. Christians, as new covenant believers, know by experience that this promise does not imply that we know everything or that everything concerning God and his Word is clear to us. Nor does it mean that teachers and ministers should seek employment elsewhere. What it does mean is that no longer are human mediators of the covenant relationship needed. In the Old Testament, Moses, David, and many other leaders were the immediate recipients of the covenant relationship, and they in turn mediated it to the

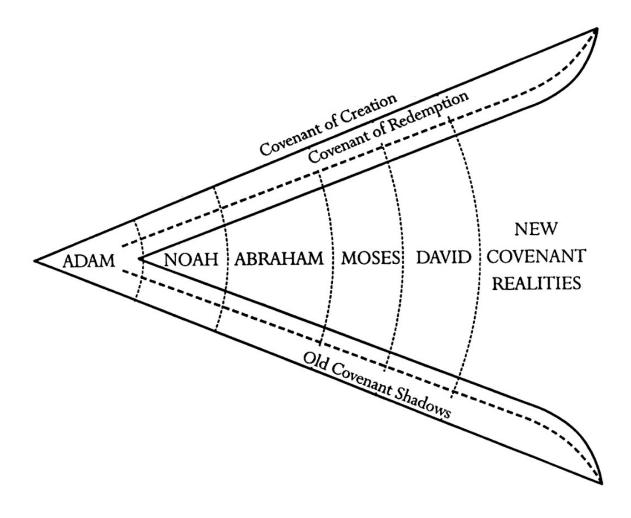
people. According to the New Testament, there is only one mediator and he is not merely human, he is Jesus Christ, Son of God (1 Tim. 2:5).

However, "new" in this case does not imply a complete break with the old. Robertson recognizes this and names the new covenant, the covenant of consummation. This highlights the fact that Jesus Christ does not abrogate or ignore the old covenants but rather fulfills them.

Space and time do not permit full justification of this point. Robertson does an excellent job showing how the new covenant relates to the old. He utilizes what we, his former students, used to call the "lazy V" diagram to indicate that the covenants are a function of progressive revelation, each building on the previous ones until they are consummated in Christ (see diagram on the following page).

The diagram visually represents the fact that Jesus fulfills the covenant with Abraham with its promises of descendants, land, and blessing for the nations (Gen. 12:1–3). Jesus Christ fulfills the covenant of law mediated by Moses, since he is the one who fulfills the conditions of the law. He also fulfills the covenant of the kingdom of David (2 Sam. 7), since he is David's greater Son who sits on the throne of the heavenly kingdom, which was merely reflected by David's political kingdom.

The Covenant Structure of Scripture¹⁶



But what is the role of the law in the new covenant? This is a complex and highly debated subject, which we neither can nor need to solve here except in general outline.¹⁷ Obeying the law has never been the route to establish a relationship with God. In the Old Testament, this is recognized by the fact that God rescued the Israelites from Egypt before giving them the law on Mount Sinai. The New Testament, particularly Paul, is clear that our salvation does not result from our obedience to the law (Gal. 3:10–11):

All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith."

However, the New Testament also indicates a continuing role for the law in such passages as James 1:22–25:

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.

This language is reminiscent of the Old Testament teaching that those who keep the law will be blessed and those who do not will be cursed.

Again, this subject is complicated and the danger of a superficial understanding is great. For one thing, there is the question of how the Old Testament law functions in the New Testament. A full discussion would show that there is a continuity in principle, but not in the application found in the case law or in the penalties. Moreover, we need to remember that though there is strong teaching in Deuteronomy, the Prophets, Proverbs, and elsewhere that living a godly life leads to good results, there is also the teaching of Job, Ecclesiastes, and other books that keep us from reducing this to a facile formula. Good people do suffer in this life; bad people sometimes prosper. The New Testament indeed tells us that ultimate retribution does not take place in this life, but the next. However, to use one example, it is much more likely that you will have a good marriage if you do not commit adultery than if you do.

Jesus himself tells us that the law continues to play a crucial role in the new covenant (Matt. 5:17–20):

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

The need for repentance. Yet as we all know, not only from the Bible but from our own experience, no one keeps the law perfectly. We have all broken the law. Breaking God's law leads to rupture in relationships—both in our relationship with God and often in human relationships. Through our sin, we strain our ties with those who are close with us: spouse, friends, coworkers, Christian brothers and sisters.

We can see how this works in Daniel 9. Daniel recognized that Israel's sin has ruptured its relationship with God. Historically, this break in relationship is represented by the Exile. Daniel prays to restore that relationship through a prayer of confession, apology, and repentance.

At the heart of the Christian religion stands repentance. It is not that our faith results from repentance, but repentance flows from faith in a God who forgives. Theologically, we may want to talk about how God initiates the movement toward repentance in our heart, but then we do not want to lose sight of the fact that our relationship with God, once broken, is restored through an act of repentance: "The time has come.... The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15).

God requires acknowledgment of our sin in the context of restoring a relationship with us. And repentance does not stop after someone becomes a Christian. We must continue to acknowledge our inadequacies and rebellion in our relationship with God.

Before we go any further, we must square this point with a fundamental teaching of the New Testament. While we must repent of our sins, again our relationship with God is not based on our ability either to keep the law or even to keep up with our daily repentance. Why? Because our faith is not built on our good works or obedience, but rather on the work of Jesus Christ. He is the perfect lawkeeper. He is the only one who never broke the

law, but he is also the one who died on the cross because of sin. In fulfillment of Old Testament sacrificial practice, Jesus is our substitute.

In the Old Testament period, an animal sacrifice accompanied the act of repentance. By sacrificing an animal, the Israelites acknowledged the depth of their sin. The animal died in their place. The New Testament teaches us that our repentance does not need an animal sacrifice because Jesus our high priest offered "one sacrifice for sins," and by this one sacrifice "he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (Heb. 10:12–14).

Jesus' death and resurrection is the foundation of our faith, not our repentance; but God calls us to repent of our sins to maintain a good relationship with him. As Paul states it, "godly sorrow [over some infraction] brings repentance that leads to salvation" (2 Cor. 7:10). Daniel displayed this sorrow in the light of the sin of God's people, which moved him to repentance and restoration with God. Paul describes the same principle to the Corinthians and through them to us.

Repentance not only restores the divine-human relationship, but it is also at the heart of reconciliation among God's human creatures. Let's pause again before expanding on this thought to make explicit why we treated the role of repentance in the divine-human relationship first. The Bible teaches time and again that human relationships can only be truly restored on the basis of a restored relationship with God. We see the two intertwined as early as the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2–3). Adam and Eve enjoyed a perfectly intimate relationship with one another in the Garden as long as they worshiped God. However, the story of the Fall is the story of mistrust and rebellion against God, which resulted not only in estrangement from God but also alienation from one another.

David demonstrates how distance from God produces a break in human relationships. In David's sin with Bathsheba, he violently tore human relationships as he slept with a married woman and then saw to it that her husband died in battle (2 Sam. 11). David tried to cover up his sin, but God sent Nathan the prophet to confront him with it. Psalm 51 is David's prayer of repentance (and indeed is one of a number of model prayers of repentance found in the Psalter). Here is how that psalm begins (Ps. 51:1–4):

according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.

Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.

Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight....

Taken on its own, these verses are shocking. What could David mean that he sinned only against God? Tell that to Uriah in his grave. But in an important sense David is right. Our sins against other human beings are first and foremost sins against God, in whose image all human beings have been created.

Nonetheless, our acts and statements of repentance must go beyond a prayer, to the offended person. To restore a broken relationship often requires first a broken and humble heart. Jack Miller tells a powerful story of repentance in his book *Come Back, Barbara*. It is the story of a daughter who rebels against her upbringing by disowning God and rejecting her parents. Jack describes Barbara as turning her back on her spiritual heritage by pursuing a glamorous lifestyle of money, pleasure, and drugs. The story of the return of this prodigal daughter is a stirring one, one that climaxes with Barbara's acknowledgment of her rebellion and a return to God and family through faith and repentance.

Today, Barbara is a leader in New Life Church in Philadelphia, the church her now-deceased father founded a couple of decades ago. Jack Miller was my pastor for a number of years before his death, and his ministry had as one of its major themes the need for daily repentance in our relationship with God and with one another. His prescription for Christian living did not devolve to become a formulaic asking of forgiveness for every little offense against another. Indeed, overt repentance can at times be a bigger offense than the original offense. I remember a friend of mine becoming convinced that she had to ask the forgiveness of everyone she had ever sinned against in the past twenty years of her life. She dutifully called her parents, her friends, former boyfriends, and acquaintances. By doing

this, she brought herself some measure of relief, but she succeeded in dredging up old emotions that had been resolved long before. Wisdom is needed to know how to proceed in the matter of past offenses.

But repentance goes even further than just between individuals. Walter Wink's recent contribution to his "Powers" series emphasizes that whole societies may find it necessary to repent in order to achieve some measure of reconciliation. As he strongly states it, "human societies could not exist without forgiveness and the public acts of contrition and confession that make reconciliation possible."²¹

Perhaps the most dramatic example that Wink provides is the process happening in South Africa at the time of this writing. South Africa witnessed for many decades the brutal oppression of the black majority at the hands of the white minority in the form of the insidious institution of apartheid. Now, however, South Africa has achieved a large measure of democracy, and the black majority finds itself in positions of power. One might expect (and justice might insist) in such a situation that the powers of vengeance would immediately engulf the society in a bloodbath, but that is not what has happened. On the contrary, grace is being displayed in such institutions as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established in 1995. This commission announced a period of time during which individuals who committed atrocities can come forward and make a full disclosure of their crimes with the promise of amnesty in most cases and in the court of law.

The principle is biblical. There is no reconciliation without confession. After the set period of time, the offenders who do not come forward will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law, but repentance brings restoration. True, the commission is not God. Its work is imperfect. For one thing, some who seek amnesty come forward and disclose without contrition. And certainly the commission cannot insist that the families of victims embrace those who even sincerely repent of their crimes of hate. But it is a promising sign, this measure of societal repentance, which, as Wink's narrative illustrates, has produced many moving individual stories.

Daniel 10:1-11:1

¹In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia, a revelation was given to Daniel (who was called Belteshazzar). Its message was true and it concerned a great war. The understanding of the message came to him in a vision.

²At that time I, Daniel, mourned for three weeks.

³I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips; and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over.

⁴On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river, the Tigris, ⁵I looked up and there before me was a man dressed in linen, with a belt of the finest gold around his waist. ⁶His body was like chrysolite, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude.

⁷I, Daniel, was the only one who saw the vision; the men with me did not see it, but such terror overwhelmed them that they fled and hid themselves. ⁸So I was left alone, gazing at this great vision; I had no strength left, my face turned deathly pale and I was helpless. ⁹Then I heard him speaking, and as I listened to him, I fell into a deep sleep, my face to the ground.

¹⁰A hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees. ¹¹He said, "Daniel, you who are highly esteemed, consider carefully the words I am about to speak to you, and stand up, for I have now been sent to you." And when he said this to me, I stood up trembling.

¹²Then he continued, "Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain

understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. ¹³But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia. ¹⁴Now I have come to explain to you what will happen to your people in the future, for the vision concerns a time yet to come."

¹⁵While he was saying this to me, I bowed with my face toward the ground and was speechless. ¹⁶Then one who looked like a man touched my lips, and I opened my mouth and began to speak. I said to the one standing before me, "I am overcome with anguish because of the vision, my lord, and I am helpless. ¹⁷How can I, your servant, talk with you, my lord? My strength is gone and I can hardly breathe."

¹⁸Again the one who looked like a man touched me and gave me strength. ¹⁹"Do not be afraid, O man highly esteemed," he said. "Peace! Be strong now; be strong."

When he spoke to me, I was strengthened and said, "Speak, my lord, since you have given me strength."

²⁰So he said, "Do you know why I have come to you? Soon I will return to fight against the prince of Persia, and when I go, the prince of Greece will come; ²¹but first I will tell you what is written in the Book of Truth. (No one supports me against them except Michael, your prince. ^{11:1}And in the first year of Darius the Mede, I took my stand to support and protect him.)

IN DANIEL 10 we see the curtain pulled back a bit further so that we get an intriguing, yet mysterious glimpse of the heavenly realities that stand behind human conflict. This chapter is the first part of the final vision of the book of Daniel (which includes chs. 10–12). In general outline, this vision may be structured as follows:

- 1. Introduction to the Vision (10:1–11:1)
- 2. The Vision (11:2–12:3)
- 3. God's Instructions to Daniel (12:4–13)

This three-chapter unit is the third major vision concerning future realities in the second half of Daniel. It supplements the visions found in chapters 7–8. Chapter 9, we have seen, is a prayer, but even that chapter ends with the prophecy of the seventy weeks of years. Thus, we are again reminded that the focus of the second part of the book is on the future. But even though this is true, God's passion is to provide comfort to Daniel, and through him the faithful of his generation, in the midst of their suffering, alienation, and oppression.

To know that such a great salvation is coming in spite of the present circumstances cannot help but deeply encourage the godly. The passage continues to function with this intention to those who are living faithfully at a time far removed from that of Daniel. As we will observe, the prophecy continues to veil its revelation. It is more like a provocative glimpse at the future than anything a later reader can use to predict dates or specific events, but it is enough to serve its purpose: comfort and encouragement in spite of present suffering. Once again, therefore, for this entire section the purpose continues to be that of the whole book: *In spite of present appearances, God is in control and will win the victory*.

Daniel 10:1–11:1 serves as an introduction to the vision. It describes Daniel's distraught state of mind, leading to intense prayer. In response to that prayer God sends a messenger. Below we will discuss the ambiguity concerning the supernatural appearance described in this chapter. Is one being or two beings standing before Daniel? The answer to this question, however, does not affect our understanding of the whole. God, at some cost,

sends a messenger through to Daniel with a striking revelation concerning the future (cf. 11:2–12:3).

Before we get too far ahead of ourselves, however, let us turn our attention to 10:1–11:1 and examine the introduction to the vision under two headings: (1) a heavenly vision (10:1–9), and (2) a conversation with a supernatural being (10:10–11:1).

A Heavenly Vision (10:1–9)

CHAPTER 10 BEGINS similarly to the previous three chapters, with a date that sets when the events of the chapter occur: in the third year of Cyrus. Cyrus was the Persian emperor who conquered Babylon in 539 B.C., leaving Darius the Mede in charge. This date is surely to be understood as three years after he became king of Babylon, thus inheriting authority over the Jewish population there. The date is probably 536/35 B.C. Already some of God's people have returned home under Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel (Ezra 1–2). Many, however, decide to stay in exile, including Daniel. We are not given any reasons, but perhaps his advanced age plays into the decision. We know that God has further use for him in Babylon.

In any case, this was the year that Daniel receives his final and climactic vision, described in Daniel 10–12. Interestingly, in a parenthetical comment, Daniel's Babylonian name, Belteshazzar, is cited.² He has not been referred to by this name since chapter 5, and here is the only occurrence in the second half of the book. The reasons for this particular use escape us, but certainly it reminds us of Daniel's life in the foreign court. Perhaps it is to remind us that even at the end of his life Daniel is still in exile.

The introduction to the appearance of the supernatural being(s) (v. 1b) describes the message's major topic and asserts that it is "true" and understandable. The topic is war—"a great war" that is coming in the future.

Daniel then describes for us, the readers, what he was doing at the time of the reception of the vision. For three weeks up to that moment, he has been in mourning. From the later words of the supernatural being we understand that this period of mourning was accompanied by prayer for understanding (v. 12). During this three-week period he had abstained from meat and wine. This reference indicates that Daniel's earlier abstention

from choice food in favor of vegetables (ch. 1) was for a special short-term purpose and was not part of his long-term lifestyle. He denies himself in this case to gain a special hearing from the Lord.

Daniel also informs us that he did not use lotions during this time. The climate of the ancient Near East was hot and dry during much of the year and oils helped soothe the skin. But during a period of mourning such attention to personal comfort and even cleanliness was inappropriate and naturally neglected. Daniel was in a state of prayerful turmoil.

Then, on the twenty-fourth day of the first month,³ Daniel, standing on the banks of the Tigris River,⁴ receives a vision of a heavenly being that terrifies him. He has a human appearance, dressed like a priest in linen (Lev. 6:10) and wearing a belt of gold. His physical description looks more like a statue than an actual human being. His body is "like chrysolite, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze" (v. 6a). Furthermore, his voice booms "like the sound of a multitude" (v. 6b).

As many commentators have pointed out, the language that describes this heavenly being bears many similarities with descriptions of heavenly realities found in Ezekiel (esp. Ezek. 1). Christopher Rowland gives an excellent summary of the connections:

The first four words of Daniel 10:5 reveal very close contact with Ezekiel 9:2, though the overall impression given by the vision is of a closer connection with the first chapter of Ezekiel. The phrase "his loins" is found in Ezekiel 1:27 to describe the human figure, and the more explicit references to the different parts of the angel's body in Daniel 10:6 seems to be a development of the more reserved outlook of Ezekiel. In the same verse the eyes of the angel are said to be "like flaming torches." A similar phenomenon is said to be in the middle of the living creatures in Ezekiel 1:13. Whereas in Ezekiel 1:16 the wheels of the chariot are said to be "like the gleaming of a chrysolite," in Daniel the word tarshish (chrysolite) is now transferred to the description of the body of the angel. The body and feet

can be paralleled in Ezekiel 1:23 and 1:7 respectively, and the voice of the angel (Dan. 10:6) bears some resemblance to the phrase "a sound of tumult like the sound of a host" in Ezekiel 1:24. The phrase "like the gleam of burnished bronze" is quoted verbatim from Ezekiel 1:7, where it is used of the legs of the living creatures.⁵

Those around Daniel do not see the vision, but somehow they sense some great power because they immediately flee the scene and hide. The situation is reminiscent of Paul's Damascus road experience (see Acts 9), where Paul's companions also saw nothing, though they heard a sound and stood speechless. Daniel, however, sees and hears, and in response, he staggers and collapses. Indeed, he apparently faints with his face buried in the ground.

Full discussion of the identity of the heavenly appearance awaits the next section. However, our first thought may be that this is a theophany. After all, the language, though sometimes indirectly connected to God, has already been associated with the great throne/chariot theophany of Ezekiel 1. Later, we will develop a connection between Daniel 10 and Revelation's description of Christ (cf. Rev. 1:15). Both the antecedent reference to Ezekiel and the later use of the imagery for Christ might lead us to the conclusion that the supernatural being standing before Daniel is divine. However, before we can conclusively assert that this is correct, we must proceed to the next section, where we hear a heavenly being speak.

A Conversation With a Supernatural Being (10:10–11:1)

VERSE 9, WHICH closed the previous section, reported that Daniel heard the figure dressed in linen speaking, but the content of his speech was not given there. Daniel's response to the vision and the voice was to faint dead away. The present section opens with the first of three supernatural ministrations (see also vv. 16, 18). Towner aptly calls these three angelic touches "celestial first aid." The first is the touch of a hand, which gives Daniel the strength to get up from the ground to all fours. He then addresses the prophet with words of encouragement, beginning with "you who are highly esteemed." The Hebrew for this English phrase is really two words, "is-

ḥ^a*mudot*, the first noun being the common word for "man" and the second a noun derived from the verbal root *ḥmd* (best known as the main verb of the tenth commandment, "to covet"). Daniel is a highly desired, precious man, coveted by God.⁷ Indeed, this angelic visitation is for Daniel, so he should take encouragement.

With these words, Daniel receives courage enough to stand, though he is still trembling. The verb "trembling" in verse 11 is the hiphil participle of the verb r'd. Earlier (v. 7), the men with Daniel were said to be overwhelmed with terror. Literally, the phrase used there should be rendered "great trembling [the noun $h^a radah$] fell on them." Trembling (whether described by the verb r'd or the noun $h^a radah$) characterizes those who come into contact with the supernatural realm.

As the supernatural figure continues to speak with Daniel in verse 12, he again encourages the waning prophet. He begins with the straightforward command, "Do not be afraid." We see this comment at the beginning of a number of such speeches in the Bible (Gen. 15:1; 26:24; Judg. 6:23; Luke 1:13; Rev. 1:17). He then explains that, though the divine realm heard and began responding immediately to Daniel's prayers three weeks earlier, there was a delay because of a conflict, an obstacle in the form of the "prince of the Persian kingdom" (v. 13).

The supernatural speaker almost casually mentions the "prince of the Persian kingdom," but questions immediately rise in our minds. Who is this "prince" who can resist a heavenly being? What is the nature of the conflict of which we get this tantalizing glimpse? And, once again, what is the identity of the supernatural being who addresses Daniel and his connection with the vision of the figure dressed in linen (vv. 5–6)?

Perhaps we should start with the last question. In the previous section, we observed that the language and imagery associated with the being dressed in linen draws us to other theophanies. Our first impulse, supported by Daniel's reaction to the appearance, is to identify that figure with God himself. It is also most natural to associate this linen-clad figure with the one speaking to Daniel in the present section. Commentators like E. J. Young make this identification. However, other scholars rightly question such an association. After all, what power could resist God for twenty-one days, as the "prince of the Persian kingdom" apparently had done? Can we really imagine God being thwarted in his purposes so effectively, even if

temporarily? With that in mind, Miller suggests that we are really dealing with two figures here: a theophany followed by an angelophany.¹⁰ Thus, God is not hindered, but rather his powerful, but not omnipotent angel.

Furthermore, in verse 13 we will learn that the supernatural being speaking to Daniel was unable to overcome the obstacle provided by the "prince of the Persian kingdom" until Michael comes to his aid. Are we to think that God is unable to overcome this hindrance without the help of one of his created angels? Doubtful to say the least, Miller goes on to identify the angel as specifically Gabriel, on the speculative assumption that Gabriel is the messenger angel, a kind of Hebrew Hermes; but we know so little of the details of the angelic world that such a naming is no more than an educated guess, an unnecessary one at that.

I am attracted to Miller's suggestion that the two figures are different, the first being God and the second an angel, but I am also hesitant to be dogmatic about my affirmation of it. After all, there is no clear textual signal that tells us that a second figure has come into play with verse 10. It effectively solves a problem, but as such, we should hold it only as a possible hypothesis. In any case, we have a clear case of spiritual conflict. On the one side stands God's powerful angelic army and on the other "the prince of the Persian kingdom."

Who is this "prince of the Persian kingdom"? Calvin said that this was a reference to the human prince Cambyses." But how likely is it that Daniel sees God's angels detained by a skirmish with Cambyses? No, these verses give us a hint at the cosmic battle that parallels the earthly struggles of God's people. The "prince of the Persian kingdom" is a supernatural being who fights on behalf of that human kingdom. The Old Testament knows of such spiritual entities and events in other books besides Daniel, perhaps most notably in Deuteronomy 32:8–9

When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples according to the number of the sons of God.¹² For the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted inheritance.

The Bible here, we would argue, refers to God's angelic creatures who make up his heavenly council as "the sons of God." There are angels, in other words, "assigned" to different nation states. Such might also be implied in the warning found in Deuteronomy 4:19: "And when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars—all the heavenly array—do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshiping things the LORD your God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven." The same connection between rebellious human power represented in the state and evil cosmic powers may be seen in Isaiah 24:21–23:

In that day the LORD will punish
the powers in the heavens above
and the kings on the earth below.

They will be herded together
like prisoners bound in a dungeon;
they will be shut up in prison
and be punished after many days.

The moon will be abashed, the sun ashamed;
for the LORD Almighty will reign
on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem,
and before its elders, gloriously.

We must be careful not to speculate on the hints the Bible gives us, but that there are spiritual powers, good and bad, behind the various human institutions is a truth taught in the Old Testament and, as we will see in the Bridging Contexts and Contemporary Significance sections, in the New Testament as well.

In summary, the picture that emerges from Daniel 10:12–14 is that of a heavenly conflict. On the one side stands those spiritual forces that emanate from the Lord. The speaker, who is an unnamed angelic power (if not God himself) and Michael fight on God's side. Michael, whose Hebrew name means "Who is like God?" is mentioned four places in the Bible besides here (Dan. 10:21; 12:1; Jude 9; Rev. 12:7). Throughout the Bible, he plays an important leadership role in God's heavenly army. He is called "chief prince" and "archangel." In a word, he is a powerful spiritual being. On the other side stands "the prince of the Persian kingdom," who himself is

powerful, but we are to understand that he is evil as well. He has tried to keep the heavenly messenger away from Daniel but has not succeeded, though (as we will see below) the fight is far from over.¹³

After describing the conflict that led to the delayed answer to Daniel's prayer, the heavenly messenger announces the substance of his message, which will be delivered beginning with Dan. 11:2: "Now I have come to explain to you what will happen to your people in the future, for the vision concerns a time yet to come" (10:14). Some believe that the language here suggests that the vision will at some point address the time just before the end of history as we know it.¹⁴

Again, Daniel is overwhelmed by the vision and bows to the ground, unable to speak. Again, a supernatural being ministers to him by touching his lips so he can speak. Though this being is referred to with a phrase similar to that found in 7:13 ("one like a son of man"), we should not be too quick to identify the two, since the phrase could be used of any humanlike appearance of God or angels. The touch of the lips reminds us of the call of Isaiah (Isa. 6:7), though here the emphasis is on the granting of strength in the midst of weakness, not on cleansing. This touch only gives Daniel the strength, it appears, to express his weakness. Thus, another touch follows in verse 18, accompanied by exhortations not to be afraid and to be strong (v. 19). Thanks to the supernatural ministrations, the prophet announces that he is ready to receive the vision.

The present chapter division obscures the flow of the section. We have already pointed out that Daniel 10–12 are a unit. Granted that chapter divisions are necessary for such a long unit, the first one should have come either after 10:19 or after 11:1, not in its present place. In 10:20 the speech of the "one like a son of man" commences. In 10:20–11:1, the figure, probably an angel, gives a general overview of what is to come before outlining the details (the bulk of ch. 11). He is going to tell Daniel "what is written in the Book of Truth." Collins is surely right that, from what follows, we are to understand that book as containing the course of future history as shaped by God. He is also correct to note that the concept of such a book, followed by a detailed reading of centuries that follow Daniel, has a strong deterministic flavor.

How one reacts to that idea depends to some extent on one's attitude toward God, but within the world of the text, which we are invited to share,

this is nothing short of gloriously good news. Remember that the people contemporary with this book and throughout most periods of history are the oppressed people of God, who see no human escape from their oppression. The fact that God has scripted history and that the rescue of his people is the punch line is cause for great optimism and celebration (see the Contemporary Significance sections of chs. 11–12).

The angel tells us that he will soon return to the fray. The conflict with the prince of Persia, whom we have argued is the spiritual evil that supports the human kingdom oppressing God's people, goes on. After a while, it is implied, another spiritual power, the prince of Greece, will come. To use the language of chapters 7–8, another beast will come along. The fight will continue. But before the prophecy of the future goes on, the angel, perhaps here identifying himself as Gabriel (by allusion to Dan. 9:1), says that he has been fighting, with Michael, the prince of Persia since the very beginning (i.e., the first year of Darius the Mede). This reminds us, who tend to think of the Persians (who allowed God's people to return to Judah) as much better than the Babylonians, that these new oppressors are also evil and need to be overcome. God and his angels announce that they will fight on behalf of their people.

Bridging Contexts

In "THE NATURE of Apocalyptic Literature" in the Original Meaning section of chapter 7, we identified six major themes that run throughout Daniel 7–12. By way of review, these are:

- the horror of human evil, particularly as it is concentrated in the state
- the announcement of a specific time of deliverance
- repentance that leads to deliverance
- the revelation that a cosmic war stands behind human conflict
- judgment as certain for those who resist God and oppress his people
- the equally certain truth that God's people, downtrodden in the present, will experience new life

in the fullest sense.

We have already established the fact that Daniel 10–12 stands as a single unit. Thus, we need not expect all six themes to be present in chapter 10. According to our announced schedule, here we will discuss the fourth theme concerning the cosmic war, which, of course, is the heart of our chapter. Before we do, however, I should mention that the first theme is clearly present in the chapter as well. Heavenly powers fight evil spiritual powers that are associated with the state, specifically Persia and Greece. In other words, Persia and Greece are revealed as more than just human evil, as horrible as that is, for the veil is pushed back a bit to see the spiritual horrors that stand behind their power.

Holy war in the Old Testament. To more fully understand the cosmic war that lies behind this human conflict, we must situate the content of this chapter in the broader story of holy war in the Old Testament. This will also provide the basis on which we grasp the connections with the spiritual warfare of the New Testament. Only a brief description of this incredibly pervasive and significant biblical theme can be given here, but we can at least sketch out a basic skeleton outline that will help us build a bridge from the ancient world of the Old Testament to the New Testament and ultimately our own situation.

Holy war is a term never found in the Old Testament itself. However, the term is useful because it describes the character of warfare found there. At the center of holy war is Yahweh, the divine warrior. God fights on his people's behalf to give them the victory. Another way of stating the same truth is to say that God uses his people as a tool of his judgment against the evil of the world. We can see this impulse at work at the Red Sea (Ex. 15), the battle of Jericho (Josh. 6), the defeat of the Midianites at the hands of Deborah and Barak (Judg. 5), and the anticipation of the defeat of Nineveh (Nahum), to name just a few. It is not that Israel does not fight, but they know that their victory is not a result of their own power and strategy, but because of God's fighting on their behalf.

The presence of Yahweh as the divine warrior explains many of the distinctive features of Old Testament holy war. Before a battle, Israel had to be sure that the conflict was God's will (Josh. 5:13–15; 1 Sam. 23:1–6). They were not given carte blanche for warfare. This explains why the ark of

the covenant was often taken along into the battle. The ark was the mobile symbol of God's presence on earth. It explains too why the act of warfare took on the aura of worship, requiring the troops to be a cultically clean state. A soldier had to be as spiritually prepared to enter battle as he would to enter the holy precincts of the sanctuary. Warfare was an act of worship in the Old Testament.

After the battle, Israel's response was to praise the Lord (Ex. 15). After all, they knew that God had won the victory. In those cases where Israel actually had the upper hand in terms of numbers or weapons technology, God insisted that they divest themselves of these advantages before they entered the battle for fear that afterwards they would praise themselves, not God. Many psalms found their original purpose in the celebration of holy war victory (Ps. 24; 98).¹⁷

But there was a flip side to this idea of holy war. Israel was not always the tool of God's judgment; at times it was the object. W. Moran coined the term *unholy war* to describe those times when God turned his warring activity against Israel.¹⁸ This term is not felicitous, however, since any war with which God is involved is by definition holy. Moran also used the phrase *reverse holy war*; this is better, since Israel found itself, because of its disobedience, in a reversed situation, feeling the brunt of Yahweh's anger. While anticipations can be noted (e.g., 1 Sam. 4–5), the most striking example of reverse holy war is the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and is recorded by the author of Lamentations, who cries out (Lam. 2:4–5):

Like an enemy he [God] has strung his bow; his right hand is ready.

Like a foe he has slain all who were pleasing to the eye; he has poured out his wrath like fire on the tent of the Daughter of Zion.

The Lord is like an enemy; he has swallowed up Israel.

He has swallowed up all her palaces and destroyed her strongholds.

He has multiplied mourning and lamentation for the Daughter of Judah.

These are just a few examples, both positive and negative from Israel's point of view, where God pictures himself as a warrior in the Old Testament. Prior to Daniel 10, though, we should point out, Israel's most recent experience was the latter—God as an enemy. Israel had been carried off into captivity, not as a historical accident, but rather at the command of Yahweh as the divine warrior.

Holy war in Daniel. The book of Daniel is written with this as a background. Yahweh in the distant past fought on Israel's side when they were obedient. However, he also fought against them when they strayed. Where do they go from here? It is Daniel's repentance on behalf of the people that triggers the divine response: "I am fighting on your behalf and will indeed be victorious! Your freedom from oppression will indeed be won once and for all." We have seen this in Daniel 7, with the vision of the victory of the one like the son of man over the power represented by the beasts. We have seen this subtly asserted in the interpretation of the vision of Daniel 8, when it is said of the "master of intrigue" that "he will be destroyed, but not by human power" (8:25), as well as at the end of the prophecy of the "seventy 'sevens'" (9:20–27), which states concerning the one who sets up an abomination of desolation that the end has been decreed for him (9:27).

In chapters 11–12, Daniel will describe this victory more clearly. But chapter 10 serves an important purpose by exposing the spiritual realities behind the wars of Yahweh up to this point. In the description of the historical battles throughout most of the Old Testament, the concentration is on the earthly. Certainly the heavenly forces that have supported Israel have been revealed, but not the spiritual powers on the other side.

But we should not be surprised. At its origin the spiritual nature of the conflict is clear. Genesis 3 introduces conflict into the world. Behind the rebellious decision for which Adam and Eve were responsible stands the instigation of the serpent. The serpent, as later Scripture (Rev. 12:9) makes clear, was not an ordinary animal, but rather an incarnation of the evil one, Satan himself. The conflict that emanates from Genesis 3 to the consummation anticipated in the book of Revelation is understood in spiritual terms according to the curse God places on the serpent (Gen. 3:14–15):

Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals!
You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life.
And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.

The redemptive history that follows describes a conflict that flows from this curse between those who follow God and those who side with the serpent.¹⁹

Contemporary Significance

In Daniel 10 the veil is pulled back slightly, and we see the divine realities behind human conflict. As we situated the chapter in the context of the Old Testament as a whole in the previous section, we noted how deeply involved God has been in warfare. Here we are at the heart of one of the deepest difficulties that contemporary readers have with the Old Testament: How can God be so centrally involved in something so gruesome as warfare?

In addition, there is the sad fact that through the history of the church these texts have been used to justify warfare. How many lives have been lost in the name of a "holy cause"? From Constantine through the Crusades to modern American wars, the holy wars of Joshua and others have been used as justifications for violence against "godless heathens" or those with dangerous theologies. Perhaps most despicably we see certain fringe individuals and groups that claim the name of Christ to utilize violence in the name of defending "Christian" values in the midst of the culture wars. We need only cite the murder of an abortion doctor in Pensacola by an evangelical or the tactics of the Christian Identity Movement.

For most contemporary Bible readers, the holy wars of the Old Testament are an embarrassment. How can they have any contemporary relevance at all?

Holy war and the New Testament. Daniel's picture of the warrior God in Daniel 7–12 pointed to the future. God was fighting on behalf of his people to be sure, but there was also a strong message that the decisive battle was yet to come; that is the note on which the Old Testament concluded and which reverberated through the prophetic silence of the intertestamental period. When that silence was broken with John the Baptist, he was simply continuing the hope expressed in Daniel for the coming intervention of the divine warrior who would bring evil to a violent justice (Matt. 3:11–12):

I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

Jesus came to the Jordan, and John recognized him as the one about whom he had been talking. He baptized Jesus and soon thereafter was imprisoned by Herod. While in prison John began to hear reports about the ministry of Jesus, and these reports distressed him greatly. He did not hear of burning and threshing, but rather of healing, exorcisms, and preaching the good news. Where was the divine warrior? John responded to these reports by sending his disciples to interrogate Jesus: "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Matt. 11:3). Jesus took these visitors out with him while he did more of the same—healing, exorcising, and preaching. In doing so he was telling them that indeed he was the one John was anticipating. He is the divine warrior. However, he has come to intensify and heighten the battle. No longer will the battle be waged against the flesh and blood enemies of God's people, but rather he will fight Satan himself.

Daniel 10 indicates in a way rarely addressed in the Old Testament that there was already a cosmic-spiritual dimension to the warfare of old. Now we see that Satan has become the clear object of divine battle. The irony of the gospel is that that battle is won, not through killing, but rather by dying. Jesus, the warrior, accomplished his great victory by dying on the cross.

Jesus put away human weapons of violence and commanded his followers to do the same when he rebuked Peter for using a sword to attempt to prevent his arrest on the eve of his crucifixion: "Put your sword back in its place ... for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?" (Matt. 26:52–54).

Paul too understood the warlike character of the cross and reflected on Christ's death by using military language. On the cross, Jesus "disarmed the powers and authorities" and "made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them" (Col. 2:15). In Ephesians 4:7–8, he spoke of the ascension by quoting an Old Testament divine warrior hymn (Ps. 68) to the effect that Jesus was leading a victory parade to heaven.

Jesus has completed and won the great conflict about which we read throughout the Old Testament, the battle begun in Genesis 3:15 and provocatively described in Daniel 10. But the victory is an already/not yet event. That is, the victory has been secured on the cross, but it still awaits its final denouement. Some scholars have likened the victory of the cross to the defeat of Germany at the battle of Normandy. After D-Day, the back of German power was broken in Europe and there was no doubt about the conclusion of the war. Nonetheless, battles still had to be fought and lives lost before the war would end.

We live spiritually between D-Day and V-Day. The victory has been won, but the fight is still real. The New Testament continues its use of military language to communicate both important truths: (1) We are in the midst of a tremendous battle with the forces of evil, and (2) the final victory is in sight.

The Christian's holy war manifesto. Let us explore the first of these truths by citing what I call the Christian's holy war manifesto, Ephesians 6:10–18:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take

your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

Many Christians neglect reading this passage on the basis of the Old Testament theme of the divine warrior, and our neglect can cause us to lose hope during the fury of the battle. When my boys were small, sometimes we would wrestle. They loved beating on their father until the tide turned and the old man suddenly experienced a surge of energy and overthrew all three attackers. The swing from victory to defeat brought a cry of consternation: "Dad, let us up! Let's quit! Let's play something else!"

The same is true when we stand dressed in our well-starched armor, Bible under our arm, ready to pounce on a problem. When the mud and blood begin to mingle together in an unearthly hue, it is important to know that God is still the divine warrior, who has already secured victory, no matter how tragically defeating this particular battle may appear.

We are to fight, just as Israel was to fight. But also like Israel, we need to recognize that we will have victory only as we allow God to use us. We are not to be passive; we are to "stand firm." But our strength to do this comes only as we put on the "armor of God."

Who is the enemy Paul is referring to in Ephesians 6? Our ultimate enemy is Satan and his demonic powers. Our struggle against him encompasses three fronts, and we should not underestimate our enemy's strength. To do so will lead to the temptation to fight our battles in our own strength, and our own strength will lead to our quick and easy defeat. When we realize that we have no power to ourselves to fight the battles of life, we are driven to Jesus, our divine warrior. He is the One who provides us with the spiritual weapons we need to fight—truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the Spirit, and prayer.

(1) The first front is the battle against evil "out there." Most Christians do not need to be convinced that there is a lot of sin and evil in the world. Wickedness emanates from institutions and people (unfortunately from Christians as well as non-Christians), from ourselves (as we will discover in the third front), as well as from others. The following is just the tip of the iceberg.

Many Christians from Roman times to today have suffered at the hands of a wicked government. Christian martyrs through the ages testify to the potential wickedness of political institutions. One of many contemporary situations is the plight of a Ugandan Christian named Kefa Sempangi. I went to seminary with Kefa and heard his account firsthand. He has since published a book, *A Distant Grief*,²⁰ in which he remembers his near death at the hands of one of then-president Idi Amin's death squads and his subsequent flight to the Netherlands and the United States. But even after his return to Uganda in the post-Amin era, his life as a minister and a politician has been beset by further persecutions.

The medical industry, the heart of so much mercy and healing, is also one of the perpetuators of the abortion industry, and, as such, is an institution, like all other human institutions, tainted by the hand of the Evil One. One woman confided in me that as a teenager she turned to her doctor for help when she discovered she was pregnant. The doctor advised her that she needed an abortion and calmed her fears with the assurance that there was nothing wrong with the procedure. She has struggled with guilt-induced insomnia ever since.

My wife and I will never forget the call we got from the Yale University student clinic where we went to find out whether she was pregnant with our second child. The nurse told her, "You're pregnant," but before we had time to rejoice, the nurse asked my wife if she wanted an abortion. In this world torn by conflict, the human institution most dedicated to preserving human life finds itself destroying it.

Many, indeed all, other human institutions are similarly affected by the conflict between the divine and the demonic. I have been active in sports through the years. I have derived enjoyment and a healthier body because of it. But I can also testify on some levels there is a sports ethos that allows, and even encourages, the use of pain-deadening and muscle-enhancing drugs, which are ultimately life-threatening. My wife and I both sport bad knees, the direct result of coaches insisting that we start playing too soon after a minor injury. They were more interested in winning than in health.

Even the church as an institution has been the source of much pain and evil. It doesn't take the obvious cases like the Spanish Inquisition to illustrate this point. We have all experienced the hardness of a dysfunctional church family at some point in our Christian life. One of the saddest moments of my life was when I was up for ordination. The denomination I belonged to had a liberal tendency, but I did not know much better since I was still a young Christian at the time. It was the denomination in which I grew up, and I felt attached to it. However, I was wise enough to go to an evangelical seminary because I knew I had to be taught by people who respected the Bible as God's Word, something not true of this denomination's seminaries.

About a year into my work, the ordination council called me to a meeting and told me that they would not ordain me because I attended an evangelical seminary and because I held certain biblical doctrines. What hurt me more than anything was the conversation I had with another person my age while I was waiting for the committee to meet with me. This man ridiculed me for my trust in the Bible and then proceeded to deny every doctrine I considered important to Christianity—the historicity of Jesus, the role of the Holy Spirit, the trustworthiness of Scripture, and the Second Coming. He, too, was meeting with the church council that day, but for a reason different from my own. He was being ordained on Sunday, and they were setting up the service for him! I felt like someone kicked me in the face.

These are just a few of the examples of societal forces and institutions that are the source of evil against which we should battle. But we all know

that institutions are not abstract entities that exist independent of human involvement. Institutions are made up of people. We are talking about a spiritual battle with real people on either side.

(2) Another front is the fight to "win souls." Opinions may differ, but I cringe every time I hear someone say, "I won a soul for Christ." Perhaps it's the arrogant voice that usually goes along with the claim. But I must admit that there is some truth to this old Christian expression. When we share the gospel with others, we are involved in warfare, just as real as, and indeed with longer lasting implications than, the battle of the Israelites against Jericho.

A careful study of the entire Bible indicates that evangelism replaces warfare as we move from the Old to the New Testament. That is, in the Old Testament, the predominant way of relating to the outsider (the non-Israelite) was to fight with real weapons. In the New Testament, the way we are to relate to the non-Christian is defined by Jesus in the Great Commission: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19–20).

Does not experience teach us that evangelism is often like a war? Some of our experiences are more explicitly warlike than others. There are plenty of Christians who can tell horrifying stories of real abuse as a result of evangelism. The main reason for this is that when we share the gospel with a stranger or friend, we are not just involved in a quiet clash of ideas with another rational human being. We are sharing the news of sin and redemption with someone who is on Satan's side, whether that person is conscious of it or not.

If a person is not devoted to Christ, there is only one other alternative—he or she is devoted to Christ's enemy. That is why Paul talks about baptism as a symbol of death. It is warfare. If a person becomes a Christian, one dies to the old self and puts on the new by "having been buried with him [Christ] in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead" (Col. 2:12).

(3) The battle on the third front is that between the "new self" and the "old self." Jesus instructed us to take the beam out of our own eye before we take the speck out of our brother's eye (Matt. 7:5). In this way, he was

telling us that the battle is not only against others, it is also within ourselves. Facing the deeply embedded evil of our own hearts is where the most bitter fighting occurs. It's like a civil war. Your enemy, your old self, is a dearly loved friend you really don't want to kill. The apostle Paul perceptively shared the struggle that went on in his own heart, knowing that it is a struggle we all go through (Rom. 7:21–24a):

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am!

Once we become Christians, we are no longer in Satan's army; we are in Christ's. We fight for the gospel, taking on Satan, our former commander-in-chief. However, there is a part of us that still acts as if we are part of this world rather than pilgrims looking forward to the realities of heaven. The Bible names this tendency the "old self" (Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:9) and tells us to cast it off and put on the "new self." Theologians call this the process of "sanctification," but that is just another way of saying that Christians should become more like Christ every day.

Whatever you call it, our Christian growth is a battle against Satan in our own hearts. This front, for most of us, is the hardest. It's not easy to fight evil in another person. It may be tough for some of us to share the gospel with others. But it is grueling to face the dark, cold reality that we have to battle against our own vicious and destructive thoughts, emotions, and actions.

This is because deep down we really enjoy our sin and find any way we can to justify it in our eyes. I am not often emotionally down, but when I am depressed I need to have a scapegoat—God has given me too much work, my wife is ignoring me, my children are brats, my Little League team is uncommitted. I would much rather be happy than depressed, but at times like this, I would rather be depressed than to think that I have overcommitted myself to writing projects, been cold toward my wife, not

disciplined my children sufficiently, and not taught my Little Leaguers how to hit or field.

As we engage in battle on this final front, we must remember that it is ultimately God against whom we struggle. It is not merely the new us that takes on the old us in our own power. The battle of the cosmos—the struggle between God and Satan—is waged in our very hearts, and the message of the Bible is absolutely clear: Nothing can stand before God in defiance and survive. This is the reason why the battle always goes to the advantage of the new self; it is God who fights for us. The Bible confirms that life is a battle. This is why God has revealed so much throughout its pages about his nature as a warrior and our participation in his army.

Our weapons. However, it is important to remember, especially as we focus in this commentary on an Old Testament book, that as we move from the Old Testament to the New Testament period, the warfare has shifted from a physical to a spiritual battle. It is one we must fight with spiritual weapons, not physical ones. That is, the teachings of Jesus do not allow us to hit an abortionist or bomb a clinic. We are not permitted to kidnap a potential convert and force him or her to listen to the gospel. And we should not whip ourselves (physically as some monks did in the Middle Ages) to discourage our sinning. Our weapons are prayer, faith, and bold love.

(1) Most of us think of prayer as a retreat from the action, not as an offensive weapon with which we attack the enemy. After all, when we want to pray, we usually seek out a quiet spot. We also hear and use the expression "let me pray about it" when we are not sure we want to do something we are asked to do.

In reaction against this, we must cultivate a mindset that sees prayer as a powerful tool by which to foil Satan's schemes and destroy his handiwork. We are to see prayer as our principal means of communication with our divine war Commander.

In the war between Iraq and the allied forces who came to the aid of Kuwait, one of the largest of many discrepancies between the two sides was in the area of communication. The allies were in constant touch with each other and knew the enemy positions through the use of highly sophisticated technology. On their part, the front lines of the Iraqi armies knew little about their enemy's positions and could not even communicate with their commanders in Baghdad. The result was a lopsided victory for the Allies.

We need to use prayer to ask our spiritual Commander to open our eyes to the conflict so we may see where the Enemy is located, and then to provide us with the strength to carry on the battle.

The curses of the psalms are a model of using prayer as a weapon. The psalmist in Psalm 69:24–25, 27 made some strong statements as he spoke to God about his enemies:

Pour out your wrath on them;
let your fierce anger overtake them.
May their place be deserted;
let there be no one to dwell in their tents....
Charge them with crime upon crime;
do not let them share in your salvation.

While these psalms are models to us for prayer, they must be wisely used in the knowledge that the object of our warfare has shifted from flesh and blood enemies to spiritual ones. Our weapons must be spiritual, too. One concrete way the Christian can use prayer as a weapon against an abuser is to pray for his or her repentance.

(2) A second weapon of spiritual warfare is faith, a deep trust in the One who is our commander-in-Chief, Jesus Christ. Faith is multifaceted. One of the ways to think of faith is as a willingness to let go, to relax in the presence of someone who is good. A small child squeals with anticipation as her father lifts her above his head and gently tosses her into the air, catching her as she tumbles toward the ground. Such a child could scream and cry at being lifted and turn her little body into a stone-like, inflexible dead weight. Such a response would indicate a lack of trust. Faith may not take away all our fear or doubt, but it will enable us to know, at some deep level, that our Father is good and his purpose consistent with his character.

Faith, then, is an assertion of trust, even when our circumstances point in a direction that seems to call into question God's goodness. Faith is vision of what cannot be seen, a knowing of something that is beyond verifiable human knowledge. It is an assent to the inner witness of the Spirit that continues to keep a flame alive in us after all our efforts to snuff it out have failed. Fundamentally, we know that he is capable and willing to bring the battle to a successful completion. Indeed, the Scriptures tell us that he has

already accomplished the victory on the cross, and we have a preview of the final day in the book of Revelation.

One of the many lessons of the Vietnam War was the disastrous consequences of a lack of trust between soldiers and their commanding officers. Soldiers often did not trust the abilities of their officers, and there were even alarming reports of soldiers putting a bullet in the back of their officers during battles. A firm trust in God is incredibly important if we are to endure the day-to-day battles of life. We need to know that God is there in his power to encourage us to face the angry boss at work, our unrepentant spouse, or our disobedient children.

These are just two of the spiritual weapons which Ephesians 6 mentions. In closing I want to emphasize that the spiritual nature of our weapons does not mean that they are intangible. We are not to be passive. We are not called to love people, even those who hurt us, from a distance, but we are required to move into their lives to open the door to their repentance.

Territorial demons? Before shutting the door on our discussion of spiritual warfare, we must address the issue of engagement with supernatural enemies, specifically territorial demons. Is this a fourth front of our warfare? There is a growing call in some sectors of the church worldwide and in America today to engage in battle with demons that control specific geographical regions.²¹ The foundational text for such a strategy is Daniel 10, so it is vital for us at least to speak to the issue, if only briefly.

I must confess, as I discuss this volatile issue, that my experience in this area has not been extensive or encouraging. Biblically, I affirm the existence of the world of supernatural evil forces, and Daniel 10 in particular witnesses to the association in some sense of demonic powers with specific geographical regions. However, as I have emphasized above, this chapter gives us just the merest of glimpses, and it seems to me that advocates of spiritual mapping take the concept far beyond the limits of biblical revelation. Fortunately, much of their research into the demonic activity of a city really does help them uncover the ethos of a geographical area. They can see the sinful tendencies and atmosphere of an area as they move in to evangelize, but to seek to name and exorcize demons should not and, as far as I can tell from their writings, does not deflect from the task of

moral persuasion as they present the gospel as a challenge to a particular culture.

Clinton Arnold has written an excellent analysis of the phenomenon known as "strategic-level spiritual warfare," associated with C. Peter Wagner and others. In his book *Three Crucial Questions About Spiritual Warfare*, 22 he both affirms and criticizes the practices of people who engage in a deliverance and spiritual-mapping ministry. He speaks from deep knowledge of Scripture, having written a number of scholarly studies of the biblical material as well as dialogued closely with Wagner and other practitioners. I recommend his book heartily for those who wish to probe this issue more deeply.

Perhaps the two most important conclusions that Arnold reaches in regard to the issue before us are these: (1) The Bible affirms demonic activity and the relationship between demons and specific geographical locations; (2) "of even greater significance ... is the fact that the Bible nowhere narrates, describes, or instructs us on how, or even whether, we are to engage these high-ranking territorial spirits." In regard to the second point, we should note that Daniel never engages or prays against the spiritual enemies about which the celestial beings speak. He leaves those matters to God.

In the midst of a controversial issue, we must not forget the central teaching of Daniel 10: the amazing truth that God's people are not in the conflict alone. The Bible as a whole calls us to the life of a warrior in a world of conflict. But God does not send us out to fight on our own or even to pool our resources with other Christians. No, he sent his Son to first win the battle. He defeated evil by dying on the cross. He shows us that the way of victory is through love and sacrifice, not hate and greed. He gives us confidence to face abuse today because "our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us," when he comes to rescue us for the last time (Rom. 8:18).

Daniel 11:2–12:13

²Now then, I tell you the truth: Three more kings will appear in Persia, and then a fourth, who will be far richer than all the others. When he has gained power by his wealth, he will stir up everyone against the kingdom of Greece. ³Then a mighty king will appear, who will rule with great power and do as he pleases. ⁴After he has appeared, his empire will be broken up and parceled out toward the four winds of heaven. It will not go to his descendants, nor will it have the power he exercised, because his empire will be uprooted and given to others.

5"The king of the South will become strong, but one of his commanders will become even stronger than he and will rule his own kingdom with great power. ⁶After some years, they will become allies. The daughter of the king of the South will go to the king of the North to make an alliance, but she will not retain her power, and he and his power will not last. In those days she will be handed over, together with her royal escort and her father and the one who supported her.

⁷"One from her family line will arise to take her place. He will attack the forces of the king of the North and enter his fortress; he will fight against them and be victorious. ⁸He will also seize their gods, their metal images and their valuable articles of silver and gold and carry them off to Egypt. For some years he will leave the king of the North alone. ⁹Then the king of the North will invade the realm of the king of the South but will retreat to his own country. ¹⁰His sons will prepare for war and assemble a great army, which will sweep on like an

irresistible flood and carry the battle as far as his fortress.

11"Then the king of the South will march out in a rage and fight against the king of the North, who will raise a large army, but it will be defeated.

12When the army is carried off, the king of the South will be filled with pride and will slaughter many thousands, yet he will not remain triumphant. 13For the king of the North will muster another army, larger than the first; and after several years, he will advance with a huge army fully equipped.

14"In those times many will rise against the king of the South. The violent men among your own people will rebel in fulfillment of the vision, but without success. ¹⁵Then the king of the North will come and build up siege ramps and will capture a fortified city. The forces of the South will be powerless to resist; even their best troops will not have the strength to stand. ¹⁶The invader will do as he pleases; no one will be able to stand against him. He will establish himself in the Beautiful Land and will have the power to destroy it. ¹⁷He will determine to come with the might of his entire kingdom and will make an alliance with the king of the South. And he will give him a daughter in marriage in order to overthrow the kingdom, but his plans will not succeed or help him. ¹⁸Then he will turn his attention to the coastlands and will take many of them, but a commander will put an end to his insolence and will turn his insolence back upon him. ¹⁹After this, he will turn back toward the fortresses of his own country but will stumble and fall, to be seen no more.

²⁰"His successor will send out a tax collector to maintain the royal splendor. In a few years, however, he will be destroyed, yet not in anger or in battle.

who has not been given the honor of royalty. He will invade the kingdom when its people feel secure, and he will seize it through intrigue. ²²Then an overwhelming army will be swept away before him; both it and a prince of the covenant will be destroyed. ²³After coming to an agreement with him, he will act deceitfully, and with only a few people he will rise to power. ²⁴When the richest provinces feel secure, he will invade them and will achieve what neither his fathers nor his forefathers did. He will distribute plunder, loot and wealth among his followers. He will plot the overthrow of fortresses—but only for a time.

25"With a large army he will stir up his strength and courage against the king of the South. The king of the South will wage war with a large and very powerful army, but he will not be able to stand because of the plots devised against him. ²⁶Those who eat from the king's provisions will try to destroy him; his army will be swept away, and many will fall in battle. ²⁷The two kings, with their hearts bent on evil, will sit at the same table and lie to each other, but to no avail, because an end will still come at the appointed time. ²⁸The king of the North will return to his own country with great wealth, but his heart will be set against the holy covenant. He will take action against it and then return to his own country.

²⁹"At the appointed time he will invade the South again, but this time the outcome will be different from what it was before. ³⁰Ships of the western coastlands will oppose him, and he will lose heart. Then he will turn back and vent his fury against the holy covenant. He will return and show favor to those who forsake the holy covenant.

³¹"His armed forces will rise up to desecrate the temple fortress and will abolish the daily sacrifice. Then they will set up the abomination that causes desolation. ³²With flattery he will corrupt those who have violated the covenant, but the people who know their God will firmly resist him.

³³"Those who are wise will instruct many, though for a time they will fall by the sword or be burned or captured or plundered. ³⁴When they fall, they will receive a little help, and many who are not sincere will join them. ³⁵Some of the wise will stumble, so that they may be refined, purified and made spotless until the time of the end, for it will still come at the appointed time.

magnify himself above every god and will say unheard-of things against the God of gods. He will be successful until the time of wrath is completed, for what has been determined must take place. ³⁷He will show no regard for the gods of his fathers or for the one desired by women, nor will he regard any god, but will exalt himself above them all. ³⁸Instead of them, he will honor a god of fortresses; a god unknown to his fathers he will honor with gold and silver, with precious stones and costly gifts. ³⁹He will attack the mightiest fortresses with the help of a foreign god and will greatly honor those who acknowledge him. He will make them rulers over many people and will distribute the land at a price.

⁴⁰"At the time of the end the king of the South will engage him in battle, and the king of the North will storm out against him with chariots and cavalry and a great fleet of ships. He will invade many countries and sweep through them like a flood. ⁴¹He will also invade the Beautiful Land. Many countries will fall, but Edom, Moab and the leaders of Ammon will be

delivered from his hand. ⁴²He will extend his power over many countries; Egypt will not escape. ⁴³He will gain control of the treasures of gold and silver and all the riches of Egypt, with the Libyans and Nubians in submission. ⁴⁴But reports from the east and the north will alarm him, and he will set out in a great rage to destroy and annihilate many. ⁴⁵He will pitch his royal tents between the seas at the beautiful holy mountain. Yet he will come to his end, and no one will help him.

12:1"At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. ²Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. ³Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. ⁴But you, Daniel, close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge."

⁵Then I, Daniel, looked, and there before me stood two others, one on this bank of the river and one on the opposite bank. ⁶One of them said to the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, "How long will it be before these astonishing things are fulfilled?"

⁷The man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, lifted his right hand and his left hand toward heaven, and I heard him swear by him who lives forever, saying, "It will be for a time, times and half a time. When the power of the holy people

has been finally broken, all these things will be completed."

⁸I heard, but I did not understand. So I asked, "My lord, what will the outcome of all this be?"

⁹He replied, "Go your way, Daniel, because the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end. ¹⁰Many will be purified, made spotless and refined, but the wicked will continue to be wicked. None of the wicked will understand, but those who are wise will understand.

¹¹"From the time that the daily sacrifice is abolished and the abomination that causes desolation is set up, there will be 1,290 days. ¹²Blessed is the one who waits for and reaches the end of the 1,335 days.

¹³"As for you, go your way till the end. You will rest, and then at the end of the days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance."

Original Meaning

Daniel 11:2–12:13 contains the second and third parts of the larger unit begun in Daniel 10:1 (i.e., 10:1–12:13, which concludes the book of Daniel). Chapter 10 introduced the circumstances surrounding the vision; these next two sections contain the contents of that message and a concluding dialogue between Daniel and two heavenly beings.

The vision of part 2 (11:2–12:4) is unlike any that have preceded it in Daniel. It begins with a lengthy prophecy about unnamed kings and their actions. While there is nothing similar to this prophecy in the Old Testament, we have examples from the broader ancient Near East, the most notable parallel being the so-called Dynastic Prophecy. This genre of prophecy, not using personal names, reads the details of history closely. Daniel 11 covers a period from the Persian period to the time of Antiochus Epiphanes. From what we know about the period we can affirm that the prophet writes with the accuracy of a historian. As a matter of fact, that is what many scholars feel is going on in this passage. That is, Daniel 11 is

not a forward-looking prophecy from the standpoint of the sixth century B.C., but rather a backward-looking history cast in the literary form of prophecy.

The arguments in favor of the latter view are strong. As we will see in our exposition, one reading of the chapter understands 11:40–45 to apply to the same king, Antiochus Epiphanes IV, as described in verses 21–39. The only problem is that, while we can confirm the historical accuracy of the description of this king in the first part, verses 40–45 appear to be an attempt at actual prophecy rather than history in prophetic form. The point made is that we can tell actual prophecy from quasi-prophecy because the former fails.

Even though the prophecy fails, many scholars who have a high regard for the Bible provide rationale for why such literature exists in the Word of God.³ These scholars represent one legitimate attempt to deal with a difficult exegetical problem. One of the foundations of a typical defense of the presence of "prophecy after the fact" in the Bible is that it is a well-known genre of literature in the ancient Near East. It is precisely with this argument that I have found myself unable to follow and accept this line of reasoning. It is indeed true that this genre of literature is well known in the ancient Near East, if we mean by this that it is well attested. However, for this type of literature to work—that is, if it is to achieve its intended effect on an audience—they cannot know that it is quasi-prophecy. In order to build up the reader's confidence that God controls history and that he is sovereign over the future, the reader must believe that the prophecy is precisely that.⁴

The reading below assumes that Daniel 11 is actual prophecy. However, I admit up front that the explanation given for the transition from Antiochus IV to a future antichrist figure is not a particularly strong one. In short, there are no clear textual signals that there is a change of referent as we move from verse 39 to verse 40. There are subtle indicators, such as the mention of the "time of the end" and the increased use of mythical materials, but we must be aware of the tenuousness of our interpretation and allow room for difference of opinion on this point of interpretation among those who affirm the truth of the Word of God.

Part 2 ends on a strong note of hope, at least for those who agree with Daniel. As we will see, we get the first and only Old Testament reference to

double resurrection in 12:2–3. Not only will the righteous rise to their reward, but the wicked will meet their punishment.

Part 3 functions as a kind of appendix and could be given a separate entry in the commentary. However, for reasons of convenience, we will treat 12:5–13 with what immediately precedes it. It is linked with chapters 10–12 by bringing us back to the scene at the river, with the heavenly being's hovering over the middle of the river. Now there are clearly two other angelic beings, and the book concludes with a final dialogue between Daniel and these supernatural beings.

We will study this unit of Daniel guided by the following outline: (1) Persia and Greece (11:2–4); (2) struggles between the kings of the North and the kings of the South (11:5–20); (3) the climactic king of the North (11:21–35); (4) the king who will do as he pleases (11:36–45); (5) the salvation of God's people (12:1–4); (6) final words (12:5–13).

Persia and Greece (11:2–4)

IT MAY SEEM odd that the angel begins by asserting that what he says is true. Would Daniel have expected anything else? Of course not, but the statement reminds us that we are to imagine Daniel in the sixth century hearing detailed events that cover the next few centuries. As we look back with our *Cambridge Ancient History*⁵ or its equivalent, we do not need much convincing. In our commentary we will supply names and specific events for the prophecies as they move from the time of Daniel to the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The specific events are so well documented that we will not footnote the connections we make between the prophecies and the actual events. Such may be found in any reputable history of the period.

The angel begins with the assertion that three more kings will appear in Persia, and then a fourth. Now, unless we are willing to admit that Daniel knew the history of the Seleucid period perfectly but the Persian period inadequately, we must not understand this statement to mean that only four Persian kings ruled after the first, namely, Cyrus.⁶ Conceivably, the four kings include Cyrus and refer to the only four Persian kings mentioned in the Bible (Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes, cf. Ezra 4:5–7), but this is doubtful. After all, the reference suggests four kings besides Cyrus.

We are not certain either who the fourth king is, the one who "will be far richer than all the others" (v. 2). He is also characterized as the one who

will "stir up everyone against the kingdom of Greece." Our first thought, and perhaps the best guess, is Xerxes I (486–465 B.C.). This Persian was a great and powerful king, and it is arguable that he set off the chain of events that over a century later led to the downfall of Persia at the hands of the Greeks, for he chose to invade areas controlled by Greeks. He failed at this attempt, being defeated at Salamis in 480 B.C., but his actions led to a Greek-Persian conflict that ended with Alexander.

The other candidate for the fourth Persian king is the last Persian emperor, Darius III (336–330 B.C.), who was the one who fell to Alexander. He was not the richest, but he was the one to fall. Miller puts forward an attractive hypothesis, though again not provable because it does not take us even close to the fall of Persia, that the three kings are those that follow Cyrus in succession (Cambyses, Smerdis, and Darius I Hystaspes) and that the fourth is Xerxes I.⁷ To be frank, however, we cannot be sure how to construe the mind of the author at this stage.

This verse is one of the few ambiguities in the chapter. We know with certainty the identity of the "mighty king" of verse 3—none other than Alexander, whom we call "the Great." But as soon as he came on the scene, he disappeared from it. Alexander was king of Macedon, succeeding his father Philip, in 336 B.C., and by 330 he had conquered Persia. He continued his conquests and reached the Indus, but died in 323, leaving his mentally challenged half brother Philip III and his son Alexander IV in charge. These two were under the guidance of Perdiccas. All three were eventually murdered: Perdiccas in 321, Philip III in 317, and Alexander IV in 311. Power passed into the hands of Alexander's four leading generals—thus the reference in verse 4 to the "four winds of heaven."

Since Daniel is concerned with the people of God, focus immediately shifts to two of the Diadochoi (or "Successors," as the four were known), those who had their power base in Syria (the kings of the north) and those who had their power base in Egypt (the kings of the south). In the north, the rulers eventually became known as the Seleucid dynasty, and in the south ruled the Ptolemies. Judah was right in the middle, and the story of the third and second centuries B.C. is an account of how Judah passed back and forth between the Ptolemies and the Seleucids.

Struggles Between the Kings of the North and the Kings of the South (11:5–20)

THE STORY OF the Ptolemies and Seleucids begins in earnest in verse 5. To start, the king of the south is Ptolemy I. He had taken Egypt from the point of Alexander's death. The king of the north was Seleucus I. Upon Perdiccas's assassination (421 B.C.), he was given the satrapy of Babylon, but in 316 had sought refuge with Ptolemy in Egypt to avoid conflict with another powerful Diadochi, Antigonus. When Ptolemy and Seleucus defeated Antigonus in Gaza in 312, Seleucus returned to Babylon. In 301 B.C. at the Battle of Ipsus the struggles between the various Diadochi were resolved when the elderly Antigonus and his son Demetrius were defeated. It was at this time that Syria-Palestine was assigned to Seleucus. However, his long-standing ally Ptolemy moved against his holdings and occupied Palestine. Seleucus and his successors never gave up claim to this area, however, so there was now tension between the two that would play itself out to the end of the period.⁸

Some years later (ca. 250 B.C.) a dynastic marriage was planned, presumably to soothe matters between the two royal houses (cf. v. 6). Ptolemy II Philadelphus gave his daughter Berenice in marriage to Antiochus II Theos, who was the grandson of Seleucus. Antiochus II had divorced his first wife, Laodice, to marry Berenice. A son, whose name we do not know, was born of the second union, but then Antiochus reconciled with Laodice, who promptly had her husband, Berenice, and her son poisoned; thus, "she will not retain her power" (v. 6).

Needless to say, these actions did not help the relationship between the Seleucids and the Ptolemies. In verse 7 we have an allusion to the fact that Ptolemy III Euergetes, Berenice's brother, came to the throne in 246 B.C. and waged war against the son of Laodice, Seleucus II Callinicus, who had inherited the northern throne. In the process of the successful campaign, Ptolemy III stole the images of the gods and returned them to Egypt. However, his success was not long-lived for Seleucus II attacked the south and, though he did not take Egypt, recovered his land. The battles continued.

The sons of Seleucus II Callinicus, alluded to in verse 10, are Seleucus III Cerannus, who ruled from 227–223 B.C., and one of the most famous of all the Seleucid rulers, Antiochus III the Great, who had a long reign from

223–187. In the south Ptolemy IV Philopator took the throne but was not up to the task; thus, Antiochus III got back large tracts of his land. Daniel 11:10 says that he was successful "as far as his fortress." We cannot be certain about this reference. Driver claimed this is a playful reference to Gaza, which is on the doorstep to Egypt, while Montgomery argued that the phrase means that he was hostile toward the fortress, which would make it a reference to Egypt itself.⁹

The story of Antiochus III the Great's reign continues through verse 19. The significance given to his reign likely has much to do with the fact that it was through his agency that Palestine finally shifted from Ptolomaic control to Seleucid control, thus setting the scene for the horrors of his son's reign (cf. below on vv. 21ff.).

Verse 11 describes what has come to be known as the battle of Raphia in 217 B.C., between Antiochus III and Ptolemy IV.¹⁰ In 218 Antiochus was steadily advancing in Coele-Syria and in the winter set up his headquarters in the city of Ptolemais. The next summer (June 22, 217 B.C., to be exact), Ptolemy IV and Antiochus III met in Raphia in the most southern part of Palestine. The Ptolemaic side had the advantage in numbers and won the day. Antiochus retreated to his capital in Antioch.

Ptolemy won the battle, but it would be relatively short-lived. He did not follow up his victory, but allowed Antiochus to lick his wounds. Of course, it may not have been logistically possible for Ptolemy to do any more than that. Furthermore, for the first time the Ptolemies used native Egyptian troops for the war, and not long afterward the native Egyptians were exercising their newfound sense of power and rebelling against the ruling foreign house. These revolts added an element of internal instability to the picture for the Ptolemies.

Antiochus began to recover a few years later, and he exerted his efforts to the eastern part of his empire and recovered land that had been lost on that front. That kept him occupied from 212–205 B.C. In 204 suddenly Ptolemy IV and his queen died. Ptolemy IV was only thirty-five at the time of his death and his son and heir, Ptolemy V (who would receive the cognomen Epiphanes) was about six years old. Antiochus felt that the time was right to press the advantage against his old enemy in Egypt. While Ptolemy V was young, the real power was a high official named Agathocles, who was not popular in Egypt because of his heavy-handed policies.

The first engagement did not go well for Antiochus III; Scopas, the Ptolomaic general, beat him back. But in 200 B.C. at the battle of Panium (later called Caesarea Philippi), Antiochus won a decisive victory. After a century of Ptolemaic rule, Syria-Palestine came under the control of the Seleucids.

Verse 14 is obscure in detail, but acknowledges that these great events caused turmoil among the Jewish people. We are not sure to whom the "violent men" refer, but we do know there were political power plays going on at the time in Jerusalem. The Oniads controlled the high priesthood and supported Egyptian rule, but the Tobiads, a politically powerful family related by marriage to the Oniads, leaned in the opposite direction. Again, we are not even sure about what is meant by "vision." It may even be that some took heart at the prophecies of Daniel, giving them courage to think they were at the time when the end of foreign oppression was to arrive. They may have taken matters into their own hands, but failed. We cannot be certain.

Whereas Ptolemy IV did not follow up his victory at Raphia with Antiochus III, Antiochus pursued Scopas to Sidon; this is likely the reference in verse 15. Collins suggests that the "best troops" indicates Scopas's Aetolian mercenary troops."

In verse 16 Daniel notes that the victor began to get heady and perhaps overconfident. Earlier we heard this about Alexander just before his death (v. 3), and later we will hear it about another king (v. 36). Soon we will observe that, like Alexander, Antiochus III's rule would not last forever either, and he would have a terrible end.

But in the meantime he set himself up in the "Beautiful Land," which of course is Palestine (Dan. 8:9; 11:41; cf. Jer. 3:19). Antiochus then decided on an age-old strategy to keep his opponents in line—the institution of dynastic marriage. He gave his daughter Cleopatra to Ptolemy V in marriage with the hopes that she would incline his heart toward his father-in-law and serve as a kind of ambassador-spy in the potentially hostile empire of Egypt. However, as our verse seems to indicate, the plot did not come to fruition as Antiochus had hoped. Cleopatra, as sometimes happened in these dynastic marriages, placed, if not her affections, at least her self-interest with her husband. Indeed, she became the leading power in

Egypt after the death of her husband in 182, and her son Ptolemy VI Philometer succeeded her eight years later.

Antiochus never tired of ambition, and in accordance with the prophecy of verse 18 started annexing parts of Asia Minor as well as some Greek islands. In 196 B.C. he encroached on Thrace. All of this began to arouse the attention of the new power in that part of the world, Rome. He did not obey Roman warnings, so the Roman senate sent the consul Lucius Cornelius Scipio against him. Antiochus was defeated at Thermopylae in 191 and Magnesia in 190. He then had to retreat to the core of his empire. He had been reduced to stealing precious materials from the temple of Bel at Elymais, and he died in 187.

His son Seleucus IV Philopator (187–175) succeeded him, but he was not popular because of the burden he put on the people to raise the tribute to keep the Romans off his back. One of his ministers was a man named Heliodorus. According to 2 Maccabees 3 he was the one who tried to sack the temple in Jerusalem. Seleucus IV died under mysterious circumstances just as his younger brother, who had been made a hostage in Rome after the battle of Magnesia, was returning to his homeland. That younger brother's name was Antiochus IV, who got the nickname Epiphanes. The attention of the text turns now to this highly significant figure.

The Climactic King of the North (11:21–35)

ACCORDING TO DANIEL, the struggles between the south (Ptolemaic Egypt) and the north (Seleucid Syria) culminated with one ruler, a "contemptible person" (v. 21). The prophecy's assessment of his importance and his character is based exclusively on the turmoil that his rule created in Jerusalem. This man greatly offended the orthodox Jewish sensibilities of his time. For this, he became paradigmatic of human power that exalts itself with disregard for God himself. We will see that his actions are considered paradigmatic with ultimate wickedness toward the end of the chapter.

We left the story in verse 20, with the mysterious death of Seleucus IV in 175 B.C., while Antiochus was en route to Syria after being a hostage in Rome. When Antiochus IV was allowed to leave Rome, he was replaced by Demetrius, his nephew, who would have been his father's successor. Antiochus received the news of his brother's death while in Athens. He also heard that Heliodorus, perhaps behind the death of Seleucus, was plotting to

seize power. Antiochus rushed home to come to the aid of another nephew, who was also named Antiochus. On the way back, he received the support of Eumenes, the king of Pergamum, who wanted to support the native dynasty over a pretender like Heliodorus. Antiochus, with this help, reached Antioch and ruled for the next five years as coregent with young Antiochus. In 170 B.C., the latter died and Antiochus IV ruled alone.

There is some disagreement among commentators over the sequence of verses 22–24. Collins believes that verse 22 is a general statement about Antiochus IV's reign with a dischronologized reference to the deposition of Onias III from the high priesthood (see below), then verses 23–24 go back to describing Antiochus's initial takeover of Seleucia from his nephew. Miller, on the other hand, feels that verses 22–24 are chronological and discuss the first phase of the Syrian-Egyptian war. He thus asserts that Ptolemy VI is the "prince of the covenant" mentioned in verse 22. If find the latter improbable and so side with Collins.

It is also unclear exactly what is in view in verse 23. The ambiguous language does not allow us to be dogmatic as to whether it is still referring to Antiochus's coming to power in Syria with the help of a "few people" (Eumenes being the most notable as well as his brother Attalus, so Collins) or his gaining influence in Jerusalem.¹⁴ The story behind the latter is as follows.

Onias III was high priest, not only the most important religious position in Jerusalem at the time but also the highest political office. He was, however, pro-Egyptian. The Tobiad family was an extremely powerful force in the city. They were not native, having emigrated from across the river some years before. With them, in a pro-Syrian (and thus pro-Antiochus IV) party, was Jason, Onias's brother and thus a member of the priestly family. The pro-Syrian party wanted to turn Jerusalem into a Greek city. Antiochus was much better off with Jason rather than Onias in the high priesthood and manipulated the situation so that Jason assumed that position. Such manipulation of that sacred office brought on the displeasure of the faithful and was really just the beginning. Such a reward for Jason and the Tobiads was probably in the mind of the prophet when he spoke of Antiochus's beneficence in verse 24.

Verse 25 turns our attention now to Antiochus's actions against the south. Polybius tells us that it was actually the south that was the aggressor, but

the pivotal first battle took place as the northern army passed into southern territory. The political situation in the south was that, after the death of Cleopatra the wife of Ptolemy V, who served as regent until 176 B.C., her young son Ptolemy VI Philometer took the throne. Two of his advisors were the real power, however, Eulaeus and Lenaeus. They were the ones who initiated a new anti-Syrian policy, and Antiochus was likely making a preemptive strike against them. The battle was joined south of Gaza near Pelusium, and Antiochus won the day. Ptolemy was a young man at the time and the defeat was probably to be blamed on the two advisors, who may be the referent to the phrase "those who eat from the king's provisions" (v. 26).

Ptolemy VI's younger brother, Ptolemy VII, declared himself king in Alexandria, while Ptolemy VI ruled from Memphis. Antiochus failed at his attempt to take Alexandria and returned to the north, leaving some troops behind just outside of Egypt proper. Those troops apparently were needed since the very next year (168 B.C.) he invaded Egypt again (v. 29). The two Ptolemy brothers had reconciled and stood as a united front. More telling against Antiochus was the intervention of Rome. The consul Popillius Laenas came and presented him with a senatorial decision that he remove himself from Egypt. According to Mandell and Hayes, he was a legate without consular imperium. However, in a show of force, the Roman legate drew a circle in the sand around Antiochus and told him that he must make a decision before leaving the circle. This must have been extremely embarrassing to Antiochus, but he knew better than to disobey. So he withdrew, probably none too happy; and he, of course, returned via Judea.

I have passed over verse 28b in order to talk about Antiochus's second Egyptian campaign and for a reason. There is some confusion in the sources (e.g., 1 and 2 Maccabees) about what happened when. For our purposes, it is only important to point out that Antiochus took increasingly aggressive steps against what God's faithful people would call proper worship. For one thing he looted the temple. He also had a fortress erected (called the Akra) near the temple in order to keep an eye on the activities there. Most distressing was his stopping the daily sacrifice on the altar and placing in the temple an idolatrous object, probably a meteorite representing Baal Shamem (the Syrian version of Zeus). This object is called "the abomination that causes desolation" in the book of Daniel. According to Mandell and Hayes, it "was constructed upon the altar of burnt offerings in

the Temple courtyard. It was on this altar and similar ones outside Jerusalem that swine were said to have been offered (1 Macc. 1:44–47; *Ant*. XII 253) after the cessation of the traditional, daily *tamid* sacrifices."¹⁷

The people of God were split into two parties (v. 32): those who supported Antiochus and his program of Hellenization of Judea and those who did not. Jason had earlier been removed from the high priesthood and replaced by a person named Menelaus, who was not even a member of the right family to be a priest. But he was probably supported by the powerful Tobiads and simply outbid Jason for the position. However, while Antiochus was waging his second Egyptian campaign, Jason, the deposed high priest, heard a rumor that Antiochus had been killed and so he moved against Menelaus. However, Antiochus, upset about the frustrations of his plans in Egypt, was far from dead. Thus, upon his return he acted against God's people. He had many massacred and sold as slaves.

The real heroes during this time of distress are the "wise," who will instruct the "many" (v. 33). They are those who would be on Daniel's religious wavelength. There is some disagreement over how the "wise" are related to the Hasmoneans or whether the latter are referred to as the "little help," or whether there is any connection at all. The debate has to do with how the book of Daniel views an active, violent reaction to their oppression. I believe it is wrong-minded to say that the book of Daniel represents a pacifist view that waits for God the warrior to act. In the earlier historical battles of Israel, God won the war, to be sure, at places like Jericho, but that did not mean that Israel did not take action in some way. In other words, the ideology of the book has plenty of room for appreciation of armed resistance to the oppression.

The King Who Will Do As He Pleases (11:36–45)

Anyone who does not acknowledge a difficulty here is a polemicist in the worst possible sense. That is, he or she knows better that this is a difficult passage one way or the other, and not to acknowledge the difficulty and not to allow for tolerance for the other view is simply bad faith. The issue is: Who is in mind in verses 36–45? Further complicating the issue is the question of whose "mind" are we referring to, the human author or the divine author? It is our understanding of the nature of revelation (cf. 1 Peter 1:10–12) that the human author did not fully understand the implications of

what he was speaking about. In other words, it is conceivable that Daniel thought he was still describing the climactic king of the north, whom he has been speaking about since verse 21 and whom we have identified as Antiochus IV Epiphanes, but the divine intention may have been much broader.

There are several signals for a broader intention. (1) The language takes on bigger-than-life terms. As Clifford (who does not follow us in assigning an eschatological meaning to these verses) puts it, we get mythical, cosmic language here, that is, language that lifts us above mundane, earthly activity. (2) We have the language of the "time of the end" (v. 40). This takes us to the edge of history, which, of course, was not achieved at the time of Antiochus Epiphanes, as horrible as his reign was. (3) Finally, we know that verses 40–45 simply do not work when applied to the life and death of Antiochus Epiphanes. Antiochus did not "extend his power over many countries; Egypt will not escape" (v. 42). Nor did he die when he "pitch[ed] his royal tents between the seas at the beautiful holy mountain" (v. 45).

The latter is what drives certain scholars, some with an indisputably orthodox view of Scripture, 19 to opt for a late date of the book of Daniel. They often do so on the grounds that a "prophecy after the fact" is a well-known ancient literary genre. That the genre is well attested is true; however, they are wrong to think it was recognized by contemporary audiences as prophecy after the fact. The comparable examples of prophecy after the fact only worked if their authors could deceive their audiences into thinking they were written ages ago. My research into this genre and this particular use of pseudonymity keeps me from going in the direction of these scholars. However, it would be disingenuous of me to suggest that there are not strong arguments that support their view. Also, it is mischievous of other scholars to suggest that somehow their views are indications that they are not consistently evangelical in their approach to the Bible.

Why not assert, on the basis of the textual signals described above, that this prophecy is of the Antichrist, pure and simple? The difficulty is that there is no clear transitional statement between verses 35 and 36 or later between verses 39 and 40. In the earlier part of the chapter, there are clear signals that the narrator moves from one king to the next (cf. vv. 2, 7, 20–

21), but not in the present section. Here we have the primary textual reason why we cannot simply rule out of court the argument that verses 36–45 continue the "prophecy" of Antiochus Epiphanes.

There are views, of course, that are over the edge. For instance, some embrace the idea that the author of Daniel, living in the middle of the second century B.C., was intentionally working a fraud by presenting his prophecy as coming from the sixth century. In this case, the end of Daniel 11 is nothing but a failed attempt at predicting the future.

However, as mentioned above, my own opinion is that Daniel is speaking from the sixth century and is looking into the future. It is from this perspective that I will interpret the verses. The perspective followed here has found brief but articulate expression in the commentary by Baldwin.²¹ She begins by reminding us that biblical prophecy often exhibited the characteristic of telescoping future events. The image conjured by this term is that of a collapsible telescope—one that looked like a short one-piece tube until extended, revealing three parts. In the same way, biblical prophecy was often presented as one event, but as we witness its fulfillment we see that it was really more complex than that.²²

Baldwin cites the prophecy of Jesus in Mark 13 and its Synoptic parallels. Reading it in a later period of time we see that elements of it were fulfilled in an anticipatory way in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, but that it also looked forward to the time that we are all still anticipating, the second coming of Christ. In the same way, John the Baptist's description of the one whom he would baptize was clearly fulfilled in Christ's first coming in one sense, but awaits the Second Coming for further fulfillment. John's own doubts expressed in Matthew 11:1–19 demonstrate as well that in this case the prophet spoke better than he consciously knew. Thus, in Daniel 11:36–45 we see references to Antiochus Epiphanes taking on larger than life characteristics, which we, living in the light of the New Testament, might describe as anticipatory of a figure called the Antichrist.²³

The pride of this king will be enormous. He will exalt himself not only above every other human being, but above the gods themselves. His pride, as well as his fall, equals that of the morning star in Isaiah 14:12–14:

O morning star, son of the dawn!... You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven;
I will raise my throne
above the stars of God;
I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly,
on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain.
I will ascend above the tops of the clouds;
I will make myself like the Most High."24

As a king, the Antichrist not only has pride, but he also has power, which leads him to assert his own sovereignty so that he will "do as he pleases." As such, he attacks the gods. Interestingly, he is castigated not only for rejecting the true God, but also for disdain showed toward his own ancestral religion, perhaps mentioned because it reinforces the idea that he is a man of incredible pride. "The one desired by women" is often an epithet of Tammuz, whose cult of the dying and rising god features a prominent place for women, but is more likely the Syrian reflex that features Adonis as the object of attention.

In an apparent contradiction, however, the passage goes on to describe how this king, who exalts himself above every god, pays homage to "a god of fortresses" (v. 38)—though this may simply be a reference to the attention he pays to his own military machine and his insatiable desire to oppress others. Of course, Antiochus with his lifelong desire to subjugate the south is a suitable model for this bigger-than-life king.

Verse 40 begins with the phrase "at the time of the end," begging the question "the end of what?" Certainly it means the end of the pride and life of the king who does as he pleases. Miller is correct to point out that this "end" is followed in 12:1–3 by the resurrection of the dead, and so we should take this as a clue that the end (in its ultimate sense) is the end of time. Miller, however, I believe errs by continuing to equate the details of the following verse to specific end-time events. At this stage of biblical revelation, we are getting some of the earliest glimpses of final things. The New Testament (see below) will provide much more on the final judgment. Yet even so, we are left today with only the taste of the great realities to come. We should be extremely cautious in our treatment of these truths.

Indeed, all I feel safe asserting is the following: Verses 40–45 look forward to a violent end to history. This end will see the destruction of the

pride and arrogance of the wicked. The next section goes on to talk about the other side of the coin, the great eschatological reward for those who are on God's side in the conflict.

The Salvation of God's People (12:1–4)

THE CHAPTER DIVISION obscures the fact that 12:1—4 is integrally connected with what preceded at the end of chapter 11. The king who resisted the gods and exalted himself (11:36—45) has come to a pitiful end. We have argued above that this previous section telescopes earthly and cosmic realities as well as near-future and far-future events. The king is Antiochus, but he is also something more (i.e., worse) than Antiochus. The end is in the second century, but the end is also in the still-distant future. Just as the ideal king of the Psalms was grounded in the Davidic reality but anticipated the Messianic glory, so the wicked king of the end of Daniel is grounded in the Antiochene reality but anticipated the horror of the Antichrist.

Thus, when chapter 12 begins "at that time," we find ourselves again in that flux between earthly and heavenly reality. We deal with the definitive end of Antiochus's persecution of God's people as well as their final struggle. We are, in a phrase, at "the theological climax of the book."²⁵

We have been introduced to Michael already (see 10:13, 21) as God's warring angel, the "patron angel of Israel." Verse 1 has military and judicial overtones. Michael judges and fights in order to protect God's people. This comes at a time of unprecedented "distress," but the distress is no sooner announced than the fact of deliverance is introduced.

This deliverance is spelled out in more detail in verse 2, a truly amazing verse about which Towner declares, "There it is, the first and only unambiguous reference to the double resurrection of the dead in the entire Old Testament!" There may be others (cf. Isa. 26:19), but we agree that this is the clearest. Even so, we are left with many questions if we restrict ourselves to Daniel 12 without recourse to later New Testament teaching about the topic of the afterlife. Of course, we must not develop a whole doctrine of the afterlife from this one verse. But we can confidently affirm that it celebrates the vindication that will come both in the reward for which the righteous are destined and in the punishment for which the wicked—by which we are to understand those who have worked against the purposes and people of God—are reserved.

The righteous are described as "those who are wise" (v. 3) and may indeed have as their reference those belonging to Daniel's group or the teachers among them. They will shine "like the brightness of the heavens," presumably "like the stars," which in other contexts stand for celestial beings (Judg. 5:20; Job 38:7; 1 Enoch 104; T. Moses 10:9; 2 Apoc. Bar. 51). This hope is expressed as a metaphor, however, and we should not press the language literally.

This great hope is to be preserved through the ages, not hidden. Miller understands the force of verse 4 correctly when he states an earlier biblical analogy:

In the ancient Near East the custom was to "seal" an important document by impressing upon it the identifying marks of the parties involved and the recording scribe. A sealed text was not to be tampered with or changed. The original document was duplicated and placed ("closed up") in a safe place where it could be preserved.²⁸

Miller cites Jeremiah 32:9–12, where there are clearly two documents, one public and one preserved for posterity.

Therefore, the picture is not that of a document that becomes clearer to understand the closer we get to the end times, which will then constitute the unsealing of Daniel's prophecy. Indeed, the best understanding of the "many will go here and there to increase knowledge" is a negative one. Collins points out the allusion to Amos 8:12: "Men will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the LORD, but they will not find it," and comments that since the prophecy is sealed, this knowledge is unattainable.²⁹ That is, people will scurry about desperately trying to find knowledge in their own power, but will fail in their attempt.

Final Words (12:5–13)

SOME SCHOLARS BELIEVE that this section has the traits of a later gloss or appendix (see comments on vv. 11–12). But it is fitting, now that the message of prophecy has been delivered, to return to the scene and characters described in 10:4–21. We are back at the bank of the river, the

celestial being still hovering over the water. Now, however, there are clearly two other figures (probably angelic) on each side of the river. One of the two is surely the angel who delivered the message (conceivably Gabriel, though unnamed both here and in ch. 10). The other angel is unnamed, but (and this is more of a stretch) he might be Michael, who was mentioned at the end of chapter 10 as the angel who helped fight the way to reach Daniel in the first place. These ambiguities, combined with the debate over the divine or angelic identity of the figure in linen, make the scene a bit murky, but this ambiguity does not affect the interpretation.

Daniel again finds himself in the position of overhearing a conversation between celestial beings. One of the angels on the bank addresses a climactic question to the other one, obviously the superior, hovering over the water: "How long will it be before these astonishing things are fulfilled?" (v. 6). This question, though delivered by the angel, would be of dire interest to Daniel and his spiritual heirs, who would find themselves in periods of distress. How long would the suffering last? A term closely related to the "astonishing things" (pela'ot) of verse 6 was used in 11:36 (nipla'ot, NIV, "unheard-of things"); thus, the immediate reference to the question in 12:6 may be what follows in 11:36–12:3. If so, as we have suggested, it may have a double reference to the time of Antiochus and the time of greater horror to follow.

Before answering, the hovering figure dressed in linen garments makes an unprecedented gesture (v. 7): He lifts both hands toward heaven and swears "by him who lives forever." In Deuteronomy 32:40, God lifts one hand to heaven and swears by himself who lives forever. The double-handed gesture, at least as far as we can tell, is a statement of emphasis and certainly evokes a solemn atmosphere around what is to follow.

This figure then delivers an enigmatic answer that reminds us of the answer given in 7:25: "a time, times and half a time" (12:7). As we saw there, the intention is not to give a precise time period but rather to indicate that just as wickedness seems to be gaining momentum, it will be slowed and then stopped. Such cessation will happen at a time of great distress, since it will be at the moment when "the power of the holy people has been finally broken." Deliverance comes at the most unlikely time. God seems to work that way. When human resources run out, God steps in to demonstrate his power.

But Daniel, like us, wants more information. Thus, he asks in verse 8, "My lord, what will the outcome of all this be?" The reply comes, not harshly but clearly, that now is not the time. The celestial being tells Daniel to get on with life ("Go your way," v. 9), and again he emphasizes the closed nature of the revelation (they are "closed up" and "sealed").

Nonetheless, he does expand his earlier comments on the period to follow (v. 10). We are, I believe, to take them as words that describe the period from Daniel's time to the end. The wicked will continue to be wicked and not understand, while those who are wise will understand. In the light of Daniel's own confession that he did not understand the words of the celestial being (v. 8), we should comment that the reference to lack of understanding is not to the enigmas of the end but rather to the wicked's not understanding the overall purposes of God's plan. They continue to be wicked because wickedness seems to win out. They do not see the long-term, eschatological perspective, where it is not the wicked who will have victory but the wise, the righteous, who rise to "everlasting life" (12:2). They will shine like stars, whereas the wicked will wake up to "everlasting contempt."

But the enigmas continue in verses 11–12. Two more time periods are specified. Both are impossible to pinpoint with real events or to correlate with each other. Is the reference to Antiochus, who abolished sacrifice and then set up an object that venerated Zeus in the temple? Is it to a future desecration perpetrated by the eschatological Antichrist? Is it both? All these views have been put forward.

Indeed, if the original reference of the angel's question in verse 6 was to the things described prophetically in 11:36–12:3, then perhaps we are still dealing with a conflation of Antiochus and the greater terror that follows in the future.³⁰ Antiochus, after all, abolished sacrifice and set up an abomination, and it was about three years before the temple was cleansed, thanks to the victory of the Maccabees. Perhaps the fact that all the numbers cited here are a little longer suggests that the text is pointing beyond that historical reference point to something still future to us. Jesus, we will see, certainly understands that to be the case (see below on his comments on the "abomination that causes desolation").³¹

What is the relationship of the 1290 days to the 1335 days (12:11–12) to the 2300 evenings and mornings (8:14) to the "time, times and half a time"

(7:25; 12:7; if understood as three and one half years, the day totals are in the ballpark with these other numbers)? God alone knows—and that seems to be the point. God knows that there is an end that he has determined, but we cannot figure it out because we are not supposed to. Leave it to God, the angel says to Daniel, and through him he speaks to us. Once again to Daniel, but also to us, he says: "Go your way till the end. You will rest, and then at the end of days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance" (12:13).

This is a fitting conclusion for Daniel and for the book. You may suffer now, but God has given you a glimpse of the coming glory. God will set things right. Your reward is coming, but for now "go your way." By these words, God gives Daniel and all of his heirs the confidence to persist in the light of continuing persecution and trouble.

Bridging Contexts

DANIEL 11–12 PRESENTS the visionary message of the supernatural creatures who fought their way to Daniel in chapter 10. The concluding unit (12:5–13) finds Daniel and his celestial companions in the same place as in chapter 10 and brings this final unit to completion. As we have observed above, the visionary message looks with remarkable clarity into the near and far future. Names are not used, but from our position of historical retrospect, we can provide them along with a description of many of the events of the fourth to second century B.C. We recognize the events alluded to in chapter 11 through other sources like Polybius, Josephus, and 1 and 2 Maccabees.

This narrative is presented from the vantage point of the sixth century B.C. Even if Goldingay and other scholars are correct that the prophecy was actually composed in the second century B.C.,³² the book intends us to understand it to come from the sixth century. In either case, the book of Daniel makes a strong statement about the sovereignty of God over the historical process. If we have been reading straight through the book of Daniel, this will hardly surprise us. Every passage that we have studied has contributed to the overarching theme of the book: *In spite of present circumstances, God is in control and will win the day*.

Perhaps in no chapter is God's control displayed in such detail as in chapter 11. Indeed, for those of us living at a later time, it raises the issue of the meaning of history. If God is in such control, how can our decisions hold any meaning? Can I be held responsible for my actions if I am a mere puppet on a string held by an all-powerful being? Towner believes that the answer to the last question is no. In his often insightful commentary, he states that Daniel's theology of history means that it is "essentially meaningless.... History's only point then becomes simply to demonstrate that God's eternal decree is certain to come to pass."³³

Before exploring this issue of divine sovereignty and human responsibility, it is important to remind ourselves of the six major themes of the second half of the book, because most of them play an important role in this climactic prophetic vision. The six are:

- the horror of human evil, particularly as it is concentrated in the state
- the announcement of a specific time of deliverance
- repentance that leads to deliverance
- the revelation that a cosmic war stands behind human conflict
- judgment as certain for those who resist God and oppress his people
- the equally certain truth that God's people, downtrodden in the present, will experience new life in the fullest sense.

With the exception of the theme of repentance, we will have occasion to see all these themes displayed prominently in these two chapters. However, to complete our plan of focusing on a theme per chapter (see comments in "The Nature of Apocalyptic Literature" in the Original Meaning section of chapter 7), we will here explore carefully the last two elements: Judgment is certain for the wicked; reward is certain for the righteous.

Divine sovereignty and human responsibility. It is in the term *certain* that we get the connection with the issue of divine sovereignty. How can Daniel say that judgment and reward are certain for the wicked and the righteous? Because God is sovereign; he is in control.

This is why the issue of divine sovereignty over history was not a problem for Daniel or his readers. He was not approaching it as a philosophical problem, but rather proclaiming good news to a captive people. In the present, the wicked are in control and prospering, whereas the godly are suffering. But that is not the end of the story. Far from rendering history meaningless, it imbues it with ultimate significance. What would be meaningless is if all the suffering faithfulness of God's people resulted only in a nameless grave. What would lead to despair is if, after treading over the godly, the wicked would be celebrated in death.

Is not this the problem that the Teacher in Ecclesiastes expressed? To him, God was not in control, or at least he didn't seem to be. "God is in heaven and you are on earth" (Eccl. 5:2). For the godly, life is one pain after another, and then they die. For the wicked—well, let's listen to the words of the Teacher: "I saw the wicked buried—those who used to come and go from the holy place and receive praise in the city where they did this. This too is meaningless" (8:10).³⁴

For Daniel's audience, God's control of history was positive because it meant things would turn out right in the end. This knowledge led to joy in the present (cf. Ps. 73³⁵).

However, we cannot avoid the philosophical questions in this way completely. Does divine sovereignty eradicate human responsibility? Does God's control mean that human beings have none? Are we simply acting out a script already written? Certainly that is what Daniel 11 appears to be —a script for the history of the ancient Near East in the centuries between the beginning of Persian rule and down to the time of Antiochus Epiphanes.

Divine sovereignty and human responsibility—this is an old, old debate among theologians. And, I would be quick to add, its endurance as a point of contention warns us that the ultimate answer may be beyond our grasp. Another way to put it is, the Bible does not tell us enough to allow us to answer how these two work together in harmony.

What does the Bible teach us? It shows us, as we have seen clearly in Daniel, that God is in control. But it also informs us that human beings make decisions for which they are responsible. In the words of Philippians 2:12: "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out

your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."

God works out our salvation. We work out our salvation. God controls history; he brought Antiochus Epiphanes down and allowed the temple to be cleansed. Human beings act in history; the Hasmonean rebellion liberated the temple.

Now some people see Daniel as a quietist, as someone who would say, "God will take care of it" or "Let God...." They reason that Daniel would be against the Hasmonean rebellion or any overt actions that would try to wrest control out of the hands of God and into their own. I beg to differ. It is difficult to know what Daniel would have thought of Judas Maccabeus, but in principle he would not have been against him. That is, he would not reject out of hand human efforts. Daniel understood that divine sovereignty and human responsibility formed a mystery, but he also understood that they both were operative. He emphasizes the former because God's people were relatively powerless. Thus, the news of God's sovereignty was good news.

And indeed throughout the Bible, we see that God's control over history, while not eradicating human responsibility, was something that brought joy and confidence to his people. Let's begin with the story of Joseph.

The Joseph narrative has surprisingly little God-talk in it. As it narrates Joseph's movements from Palestine to Egypt, and from the house of Potiphar to jail and finally to Pharaoh's court, the narrator does not reflect on God's agency in his life. Joseph does the best that he can and then, or so it appears, the blind forces of chance push him around. However, that is not the way Joseph understands it, and from the climactic position of Joseph's final speech, it is not the way the narrator wants us to take it. In what must be understood as a thematic statement, Joseph speaks to his brothers, who are afraid that since Jacob has died, their brother will now work his revenge: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children. And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them" (Gen. 50:20–21). They meant evil against Joseph and were responsible, and were it not for their repentance, they would be punished; but God meant it for good. He used the sinful, selfish

actions of the brothers to bring about the greater purpose of helping his people survive a crushing famine.

Samson is another case in point. A close study of the Samson narrative indicates that he did nothing unless it was for his own good. He was a self-absorbed man, if ever there was one. But God overruled his sinful tendencies to use him to harass the enemy, the Philistines, and ultimately to bring a huge disaster on their leadership. He married a Philistine woman, which brought him into conflict with the enemy, and he responded by burning their fields or killing a large number of them with the jawbone of an ass. Once he actually destroyed the gate of the Philistine city of Gath—a wonderful display of power over this arrogant enemy. But why did he tear it down with his superhuman strength? Because he was caught visiting a prostitute and he was holding the gate over his head to keep from getting killed!

Even the dramatic end of Samson's story is clouded, at best, with mixed motives. After Delilah's betrayal, he found himself in Philistine custody, bereft of his strength, blinded, and made a fool. As he stood bound to a pillar, he made one final request of God: "O Sovereign LORD, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes" (Judg. 16:28). He then brought down the house—literally—on the heads of the Philistines, as well as his own. Again, a great victory over the enemy, but for what reason? His own eyes, not the glory of God. God controls history. He can even overrule the evil or mixed motives of others to bring about his purposes.

We get another important window on the issue of divine sovereignty and human responsibility from the theology of holy war in the Old Testament.³⁶ Again, we bow before a mystery. God's victory is certain; there is no doubt about the outcome of a war when Yahweh enters the battle. The Israelites can just stand back and watch as God overwhelms the enemy. But they do not. They always enter the fray in some way. At Jericho, God commands them to march around the city each day for six days and then on the seventh to march around the city seven times and then blow their trumpets (Josh. 6). This they do. They participate, though there is no doubt as to the outcome or to whom the praise belongs.

God fights for Israel also during the days of Gideon (Judg. 7). He could have defeated the Midianites alone, but he does not do so. Indeed, he

commands Gideon to pare down his troops from 32,000 to 300, but the 300 troops still have a job to do.

Goliath was a giant of a soldier, but no match for God. The Lord could have said to Israel, "Stand back so you don't get singed," just before he threw a lightning bolt down from the heavens to reduce the giant to a pile of ash. But that is not the way he did it (1 Sam. 17). Rather, he sends in unarmored and poorly weaponed young David, an inexperienced boy, against a hardened mercenary; but since God is on the side of David, there is again no doubt about the outcome. The head of Goliath is cut off.

Similarly, Daniel 11–12 concerns the various kingdoms that oppress Israel in the fourth and third centuries. Though we do not hear of God's direct involvement in the manner of holy war until the final conflict, we do see his guiding hand in the rise and fall of successive kingdoms (Persia succeeded by Alexander's Greece, succeeded by the Ptolemies and Seleucids). Indeed, the implicit message of this narrative is that, though they all have imperial pretensions, none of them can achieve any lasting or significant empire (in the grand scheme of things) because they keep each other in check. We particularly see this in the seesaw conflict between the Ptolemies and the Seleucids as they wrestle for control of Israel, the "Beautiful Land."

Thus, while we struggle with the harmony between the two themes of divine sovereignty and human responsibility, the Bible clearly teaches that God is sovereign and humans are responsible. We cannot provide a philosophical answer to the conundrum, but they work together. How? We cannot tell. This perspective will leave some dissatisfied. God does not ask for comprehension, but rather for humility before the mystery—the amazing mystery that God can take even sinful human actions and work things out for good.

The wicked and the godly each get their ultimate due. What is the intended effect of the foregoing on the original audience? Towner this time has it right: "The fact that the predicted course has been followed in exquisite detail leads that reader to turn about and face forward with confidence, certain that the future, too, though not yet come to pass, will be as securely in God's hand as world history has been since the seer's time."³⁷

Why confidence? Because, though prospering in the present, the wicked will get their due, and, though suffering in the present, the godly will get

their reward. God will see to it.

We have seen these themes from the beginning of the book. Daniel and the three friends, though put through extremely difficult times, were raised higher and higher in glory, while their enemies often were humiliated or even died. We have seen in each of the previous visions of Daniel (chs. 7, 8, 9) that the triumphant wicked end up being destroyed themselves. In chapters 10–12, "events unfold as a pointless sequence of invasions, battles, schemes, and frustrations." Persia falls to Greece (11:3); the great kingdom of Alexander "will be broken up and parceled out toward the four winds of heaven" (11:4). Their successors will fall as well, including Antiochus and the greater evil force that he represents: "Yet he will come to his end, and no one will help him" (11:45).

But that is not enough. Our chapters go further—indeed, further than anywhere else in the Old Testament—in order to address the issue of justice and retribution. The rewards and punishments for faithfulness and rebellion go beyond death itself: "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever" (12:2–3).

The wicked will certainly be eternally shamed; "for the wicked to die the same death as the righteous is not enough." Many places in the Old Testament struggle with the issue of divine retribution. After all, the book of Deuteronomy with its covenantal form implies, when isolated from the rest of the canon, that obedience to God will lead to blessings (Deut. 28:1–14), while disobedience will lead to suffering (28:15–68). The book of Proverbs, at least its major theme, celebrates the way of the righteous over the way of the wicked:

The house of the wicked will be destroyed, but the tent of the upright will flourish. (Prov. 14:11) The path of life leads upward for the wise to keep him from going down to the grave. (15:24) Understanding is a fountain of life to those who have it, but folly brings punishment to fools. (16:22)

But experience did not seem to bear this out, at least with the precision of an absolute principle. The Teacher was deeply troubled by real life when he expressed what he observed and gave advice to his listeners based on his experience (Eccl. 7:15–18):

In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked many living long in his wickedness.

Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise—
why destroy yourself?

Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool—
why die before your time?

It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other.
The man who fears God will avoid all extremes.

But the Teacher was looking only "under the sun." Daniel, thanks to the revelation provided by the celestial beings, gets a view above the sun. If there is going to be any ultimate retribution, it must be "above the sun." Dying is not enough; there must also be eternal shame for people like Antiochus, who persecute God's people. They must be raised from the dead to experience that shame.

Similarly, on the other side, the life of the godly during the period in Daniel's purview is hardly just reward for faithfulness in the midst of persecution. The celestial revelation gives Daniel and his followers the good news: They have something wonderful to look forward to, even after death. As mentioned before, this is the clearest teaching of the afterlife in the Old Testament, but there are certainly indications that lead up to this point.

Genesis 2 describes the first man and woman in the Garden of Eden. The Garden has in its midst two trees, one being the tree of life. The implication seems to be that as long as Adam and Eve are in the Garden they will enjoy life. However, they rebelled against God and were ejected from the Garden,

no longer having access to the tree of life. As such, they eventually died. It was with their rebellion against God that death entered the world.

Nonetheless, they did not die immediately, and it was possible for Adam and Eve and their descendants to enjoy a relationship with God. Still, there is little explicit talk about life after death in most of the Old Testament. At best, existence was understood to continue in a shadowy locale called Sheol, which may simply be a reference to the grave. Sheol is not presented in a positive light, nor was fellowship with God thought to continue, as we see in the plea of Psalm 6:5: "No one remembers you [God] when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave?"

Other psalms, however, hint at some kind of continuing existence beyond the grave. Perhaps Psalm 16:9–11 is just talking about healing from a near fatal sickness, but the language is certainly suggestive:

Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

In a similar vein are Psalm 49:15 and 73:23–26:

But God will redeem my life from the grave; he will surely take me to himself.

Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.

You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.

Whom have I in heaven but you?

And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Other provocative passages may speak of national resurrection, but they use language that provokes thoughts of individual resurrection:

Come, let us return to the LORD.

He has torn us to pieces
but he will heal us;
he has injured us
but he will bind up our wounds.

After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will restore us,
that we may live in his presence. (Hos. 6:1–2)

Then he said to me: "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' Therefore prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD." (Ezek. 37:11–14)

Isaiah 26:19 is as close as we get to the teaching of Daniel 12:2–3 elsewhere in the Old Testament, and like the Hosea and Ezekiel passages just quoted, it too is probably primarily focused on national restoration:⁴²

But your dead will live;
their bodies will rise.
You who dwell in the dust,
wake up and shout for joy.
Your dew is like the dew of the morning;
the earth will give birth to her dead.

Just how new the idea of the resurrection of the dead was to Daniel's original audience is difficult for us to gauge. But we reject the idea that it is a completely foreign idea brought into the Bible via Persian or Hellenistic religious ideas. This is not to deny that perhaps interaction with these and other, earlier foreign ideas about the afterlife affected the formulation and expression of the idea in the Bible, but it is an idea that is also implicit from the very beginning of biblical religion. As we read the Bible as a whole, we see that the idea of an afterlife, like that of other important biblical ideas, has a seed form early, but is more fully developed as God continues to reveal himself to his people.

With that, we turn to a consideration of contemporary significance, where we will see that these ideas are developed even further and take on even greater clarity. Indeed, in many cases we will note that the New Testament authors actually appropriate the language of the book of Daniel in order to show the certainty of the fate of both the wicked and the godly.

Contemporary Significance

WE ARE NOW at the end of the book of Daniel, and we have heard the central theme of the book over and over again: *In spite of the present evil situation, God is in control*. In a word, God is sovereign. In order to avoid repetitiveness in the commentary, we have not fully developed the theme in each chapter, though the contents of each chapter would justify such a treatment. Rather, we raised the issue in the introduction and provided reminders throughout the commentary. However, now that we have reached the climax of the book and certainly the strongest expression of God's sovereignty not only within the world but even over death, we are justified to spend some time again reflecting on the significance of that theme for our life today. For, you see, God is still sovereign today at the turn to the third millennium A.D., just as he was in the first millennium B.C.

God's sovereignty. That God is sovereign is true in spite of the fact that when we open the morning's newspaper or listen to the news on TV or the radio, we may have a different idea. My wife and I use a radio alarm, and we wake up every morning to a news station in our hometown of Philadelphia. Besides sports scores and weather, we hear the accounts of the latest scandals, wars, and local murders and other crimes. It is easy to be

melodramatic and say that the streets of our cities are a war zone, but without resorting to hyperbole it is still obvious that social and moral chaos is evident all over the world. It is tempting to believe that when we step out into that world every morning, we are prey to incredible risk. Who knows whether, when we step out of our homes (or even before) in the morning, "our time is up" and we will find ourselves the victim of crime, disease, or accident?

The potential for harm is huge when we look at the statistics. Just last week two incidents illustrated this to me on a personal level. As I was driving my son back from school on a nice sunny day, we came to an intersection where our progress was blocked by police activity. As we sat there, a police officer pulled his gun as he walked in front of our car and set off in hot pursuit of a criminal. I did not stay around long enough to see if shots were fired, but the potential was there. In a second incident, a young university student downtown was not as fortunate. As he sat in his classroom painting a picture, a drive-by shooting occurred. Besides killing the intended victim, a stray shot went through the window of the classroom, seriously wounding the young student.

How easy it is to wander into the middle of a situation and end up dead or wounded. On one level, there is really nothing we can do to protect ourselves from these risks. We can work out, be incredibly well informed, be cautious, and still be struck down in some form. This was the conclusion of the Teacher (Eccl. 9:11–12):

The race is not to the swift
or the battle to the strong,
nor does food come to the wise
or wealth to the brilliant
or favor to the learned;
but time and chance happen to them all.
Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come:
As fish are caught in a cruel net,
or birds are taken in a snare,
so men are trapped by evil times
that fall unexpectedly upon them.

This was the Teacher's "under the sun" perspective. We are like fish caught in a net, prey to time and chance.⁴³

In Daniel 11 we get an "above the sun" perspective on life. There we see God's hand guiding the events of history. In the words of Daniel's earlier prayer, "he sets up kings and deposes them" (2:21). The Persians fall to Alexander, and Alexander gives way to the Seleucids and the Ptolemies. God finally brings all this human pretension to an end, but even before this climactic moment we see his sovereignty at work in the affairs of human beings.

The good news is that God is no less in control today than he was in antiquity. To hear some modern Christian leaders talk, we might not believe this is the case. With a note of panic in their voice, they tell us that things have gotten out of control in the seat of our government. If we do not act immediately (often by sending in a check), our whole society will be turned over to the devil!

I am not prepared to defend the moral quality of our government, nor (as will become obvious below) do I want to argue to "let go and let God." God does expect us to work for righteousness' sake. What I object to is the shrill note, the panicky mood, the sense of loss of control. God *is* in control.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. (Rom. 8:28–30)

We see in the New Testament what we saw in the Old in the case of Joseph, Samson, Daniel, and the holy war tradition. While it looks as if life is going to hell, God is working behind the scenes to bring about good, often more than good—he accomplishes his people's rescue, their salvation.

Think of the death of Jesus Christ in the light of Peter's sermon recorded in Acts 2:22–24:

Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

God was in control even as the soldiers were nailing his hands and feet to the cross. The soldiers were nonetheless responsible—they were "wicked"—even though their actions fit into the overarching plan of God.

How does this have contemporary significance for us? In many ways. First of all, it is this act that provides our salvation. It is the death of Jesus that substitutes for our death, and his resurrection that anticipates our own (see below).

But it is also relevant because it provides the theological background to the Romans 8:28–30 passage cited above. God works out everything, including acts of harm against us, for our good. As we continue reading that passage, we see the effect this truth should have on us today (8:31–39):

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

"For your sake we face death all day long;

we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

God is in control in spite of present circumstances. In sixth-century Babylon it looked to the godly as if Babylon and then Persia were in control. But they weren't. In second-century Palestine it looked as if Antiochus Epiphanes was in control, but he wasn't. In the first century of Jesus and Paul, it looked as if Rome was in control, but it wasn't. To Christians living two thousand years after Jesus, it may look as if Satan is in control, but he isn't. God is in control, and because of that we can have boundless joy and optimism in the midst of our struggles.

And we do have struggles. Those struggles may be political or cultural. They may be emotional or psychological. They may be relational. But whatever the struggle, whatever the oppression, God is in control, and in spite of present appearances he will bring victory over evil and honor to those who remain faithful to him. The book of Daniel is a call to all God's people to remain steadfast in their love and obedience to him in spite of present turmoil.

Objections to God's sovereignty. What a wonderful message! Why do so many today recoil from it? One reason may be that deep inside of ourselves we would prefer to think of ourselves as free, even if our freedom meant despair. To many control implies servitude and dependency, and the spirit of our age desires autonomy, even at a cost.

Two worldviews are prevalent in secular culture today, modernism and postmodernism,⁴⁴ the latter presently in the process of displacing the former. Both have at their heart an impulse toward autonomy and a desire to avoid ultimate dependency on a higher power.

The spirit of modernism was captured by the Enlightenment, an intellectual movement originating from the Renaissance and perhaps best exemplified by its starting point, the philosopher Descartes (1596–1650), who proclaimed as the foundation to his theory of knowledge *cogito ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am"). Existence has its foundation not in God, but in the autonomous self. Indeed, the Enlightenment may be understood as a reaction against the dogmatism of the medieval church. Modern men and women do not accept anything because of tradition or because of authority, especially church authority, but because reason proves it. Science may perhaps be possible only because of a Christian worldview, but the scientific method is often wielded in a spirit of autonomous reason. Modernism and science are an extremely optimistic approach to life, in their faith in the human mind to improve the world and to discover their world.

But that optimism has been seriously eroded since the late nineteenth century by a spirit of suspicion that detects beneath an indefatigable confidence in reason as the avenue to truth, a manipulative will-to-power and self-interest. Postmodernism casts doubt on human ability to come into direct contact with reality as well as on our pretensions to determine meaning. The modern chapter of such skepticism begins with nineteenth-century philosophers Feuerbach and Nietzsche. Their primary struggle was still against the dogmatism of Christian theology, but they also undermined any hope that one can approach reality in an unprejudiced manner and achieve truth. In perhaps one of his most famous sayings, Nietzsche wrote in his *Notebooks* (1873): "What is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymns and anthropomorphisms." As A. C. Thiselton goes on to comment and further quote Nietzsche:

Especially in religion, Nietzsche urges, people use "errors" for their own advantage, self-interest or power. Some promote erroneous "lies" merely from sheer personal need. In this sense, Nietzsche exclaims: "Truth is that kind of error without which a certain species of living cannot exist. The value of Life is ultimately decisive." Nietzsche goes further. He includes even "facts" here. He writes: "All that exists consists of

interpretations." "Truths are illusions we have forgotten are illusions."

While Nietzsche's comments here are directed specifically toward the global truth statements of theology and philosophy, they are equally relevant toward the modern spirit of science. Increasingly, scientists recognize that what they provide are not absolutely true statements about reality, but models and metaphors that explain phenomena.

It is Nietzsche's skepticism that dominates philosophy departments today in the form of postmodernism or deconstruction. A leading motif of this thought is, in the language of Nietzsche, the death of God, and in the language of Jacques Derrida, his most famous modern disciple, the denial of the Absolute Signifier. In its place stand autonomous men and women. Nietzsche hated what he called the "slave morality" of Christianity: Christians believe in an all-controlling God before whom human beings should submit even in the light of their suffering; he felt that this picture, a picture of life that we get in Daniel 11, was despicable and diminished humanity. It kept human beings in their place. Just like the caste system in India, which has served to keep the upper classes as the oppressors and the untouchables and other lower classes as the menial servants, so Christianity and biblical religion have kept humans docile in their suffering and pain.

These perspectives of postmodernism have been exacerbated by the hope for the afterlife. What better way to keep servile people down in this life than to tell them that there is a better life coming as long as they are obedient in the present? Of course, this fueled much of the criticism of Karl Marx, an older contemporary of Nietzsche, who felt that biblical religion was an "opiate" of the people. In a more popular vein, this jaundiced attitude is expressed by the commonly heard sarcastic remark directed toward Christianity, which they see as promoting a "pie in the sky by-and-by," and the jibe that Christians are so "heavenly-minded that they are no earthly good."

Descartes, Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Marx, and Derrida are just notable representatives of the thinkers who represent the currents of the worldviews known as modernism and postmodernism. How convenient it would be to say that they are just an elite with which we need have little to do. However, whether they merely express the spirit of an age or influence an age—or a

combination of the two—the important point is that they articulate what drives many men and women living today. It is really unimportant how the dynamic works. It could be that these thinkers influence modern university teachers and other leaders, who then influence journalists, screen writers, musicians, ministers, and others, who in turn mediate these ideas to the mass populace. Or perhaps the thinkers are expressing their own experiences and wisdom based on their experiences along with everyone else.

Indeed, one guess why postmodernism with its denial of even the possibility of absolute truth has so captured the modern imagination is because we no longer live in an isolated society. A century ago it was much easier for a nonmobile population with unsophisticated means of communication to live in the blissful illusion that their way of life was the best one. Now we have air travel, radios, television, movies, the Internet. In America and many other places in the world we have a mixing of ethnic groups with their different beliefs and worldviews on an unprecedented scale. And in a secular democracy like ours it is wrong simply to privilege one of those worldviews above the others. Postmodernism's lack of confidence in the truth, stemming from a denial of deity, may represent a hesitation in the light of a global community.

At its heart, however, is a revulsion of the kind of claim that Daniel 11– 12 makes about a sovereign God. In the interests of an autonomous self, God must be rejected. In the summer of 1998 one of the most popular movies was called *The Truman Show*, starring Jim Carey. On one level, this movie was an ironic critique of our media-saturated culture, but it actually went much deeper and illustrated the fact that the philosopher's message is in accord with the thinking of the wider population. The main character in the movie was Truman. Without his knowledge, he was born and lived his entire life in a huge television studio. For over thirty years, he did not know that everyone he came into contact with—his father, mother, wife, friends, and even the people walking their dogs down his street—were paid actors, nor did he know that he was the subject of a television show that played twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. There were five thousand cameras in the studio, in the buttons of the actors, in street lights, in his desk at work. The weather and even the rising sun were controlled by computers. He was the center of a huge soap opera, and what caught the attention of the audience was the fact that he did not know it.

Finally, through a series of miscues, he began to realize the "truth," that he was living an illusion. His life was controlled not by his decisions, but by a director, Christophe. Once he discovered that his life was scripted, he wanted nothing more than to escape. Even though his life was good and there were uncertainties and dangers on the outside, he wanted to gain his independence and throw off the shackles of the director. His fight to achieve that independence and escape the "set" brought the dramatic tension to the story.

At the very end, when Truman had won all our affection and we all desired his escape from this benevolent control, the deeper theological intentions of the movie came out. The director, speaking from his control tower, which was in the manufactured sky (heavens) of the set, spoke with a microphone to the exhausted Truman, who had just battled his way to the edge of the set, appealing to him to stay under his control. But in an assertion of modern/postmodern autonomy and to the approval of all of us in the audience, he rejected this control and left the set.

Even though we all can applaud Truman's rejection of a human authority that was ultimately self-interested and manipulative, the movie intended for us also to desire complete autonomy even from God. The implicit message of the movie and the explicit urgings of philosophers like Nietzsche is that God's control diminishes, not enhances, our humanity.

Here is where the critique is wrong. It is wrong because the sovereignty of God does not make us puppets on a string (see Bridging Contexts section). It does not render our actions meaningless, as they did Truman's. They are a word of comfort and hope in the midst of despair and pain. Daniel 11–12 reminds us that it is not divine sovereignty that leads to oppression, but rather human autonomy. It is the king who "will do as he pleases," who "will exalt and magnify himself above every god and say unheard-of things against the God of gods" (11:36), whom we have to fear and not God.

Even so, we as Christians must be sensitive and careful. Why was there such a strong reaction against Christianity? Why did the Enlightenment throw off the shackles of church dogma? Why did Nietzsche feel that Christianity diminished humanity, when the Bible tells us the opposite? Why do people today recoil at evangelicals in the public square? Oh, how easy it is to ascribe this only to the perversity of autonomous people. But

we must be honest and acknowledge that the truth has been used to manipulate, condemn, repress, restrict, and oppress others in illegitimate ways. And we do not have to go back to theological arguments of the past that led to Jewish pogroms, to people who tried to resist civil rights, or to the support of apartheid in the name of the faith. Christianity is being used in the present to promote nonbiblical models of the family, the relationship of the sexes, destructive attitudes toward people of "alternative lifestyles," and so forth.

We are so worried that our country or society will end up in social or moral chaos that the church sometimes speaks with a panicky voice and tries to impose a coercive lifestyle on those with whom we differ. We need to remind ourselves that God is in control. We can certainly voice our differences and disapproval, but we must do so with love in our voice and with open arms to embrace the other person. We can do this, even though it involves tremendous risk, because God is in control. The risk is that our society might, in one sense, go to hell and be a dangerous place to live, but in another sense, there is no risk because God is in control and there is more to life than the present.

Again, God's sovereignty and ultimate control is good, not evil like the director in the movie *The Truman Show*. Postmodern society shows the effects of postmodern philosophy. The tenor of the former is captured by Proverbs 29:18: "When people do not accept divine guidance, they run wild. But whoever obeys the law is happy" (NLT). We should rejoice in God's sovereignty, for not only is it still true that God is in control, but it is clearer to us than to Daniel's contemporaries that there is something beyond this life. It is to that subject that we will turn in closing.

The ultimate resolution. We do not need to argue a lot to convince people that life is essentially unfair. True, the wicked sometimes end up having their schemes blow up in their faces. Certainly there are some good, godly people who get the praise they deserve. But for the most part that is not the case. The wicked sometimes flourish and the godly often suffer. If this life were everything, it would be true to say that it is unfair, and, if one believes in God, it would be fair to say that God is unfair. The problem of retribution is a huge one in the Bible, particularly the Old Testament. We need only think of the books of Job and Ecclesiastes to remember how the Old Testament saints struggled with this issue.

Daniel 12, however, makes it clear that the wicked will ultimately get what they deserve—destruction and shame—while the godly will get what they deserve—honor and life. These themes are much more fully developed in the New Testament and are the basis of Christian hope in the midst of a difficult present.

In the Gospels we see Jesus Christ, God himself, subjecting himself to the suffering of the world, even enduring death. But Christ did not just die; he rose again. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul develops the idea that Christ's death and resurrection formed a pattern we will follow. Christ suffered so that we might have hope for the future.

Death has been swallowed up in victory.

"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Cor. 15:55)

Death is not the end of the story, according to the New Testament.

The themes of Daniel are developed nowhere more fully than in the book of Revelation. It has long been noted that Daniel informs much of the thinking and imagery of that book. It is therefore not surprising that it is here that we learn most fully about the end of history and the ultimate destiny of humanity and of each and every individual.

One link may be seen in the description of the glorified Christ that stands toward the beginning of the book. Note how it reminds us of the figure dressed in linen in Daniel's final vision (Rev. 1:12–16):

I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone "like the son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze flowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars,

and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

Other descriptions of Christ in the book of Revelation also reflect not only Daniel 10–12, but also Daniel 7 and the figure of the "one like a son of man."

In Revelation we learn more about the final war with Michael at the head of the angelic warriors (Rev. 12:7). After all, the seals are being opened (5:1–4). Even some of the time sequences seem closely related to the time indicators of the book of Daniel (13:5).

Revelation gives us the picture of the end, when God's victory in Christ is secure. The victory was won on the cross, but we await the Second Coming for its ultimate resolution. When that occurs, the final judgment will take place. Everyone will rise from the dead—some to eternal shame (Rev. 20:11–15) and some to the glories of the New Jerusalem (chs. 21–22).

This is the hope with which the book of Daniel ends and which, developed further, the Bible as a whole concludes; it is a future, an eschatological hope. How is this not "pie in the sky by-and-by"? Well, in one sense it is. We have allowed the ridicule of the world to diminish our eschatological hope, and we should not because the Bible does give us hope based on future realities. But this hope is not tenuous, based on wish fulfillment; it is based on faith: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Heb. 11:1). In other words, it is based on past realities as we have already seen in 1 Corinthians 15, the death and resurrection of Christ.

Our faith in the past event of the cross gives us a certain hope for our future, which in turn gives us confidence in the midst of a troubled present. Though we suffer now, we also can live life to its fullest. In spite of difficulty, we know that something better is coming in the future and so we can enjoy the present. The message of the books of Daniel and Revelation is not to just wait for the future; rather, in the angelic words to Daniel, it is to "go your way till the end. You will rest, and then at the end of the days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance" (Dan. 12:13).

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Notes

- 1. Other features of the book, beyond the theme of divine sovereignty, unite the two halves of Daniel. These include the obvious similarities between Daniel 2 and 7. Even closer study indicates a chiastic arrangement between chapters 2–7, which J. G. Baldwin, "Theology of Daniel," *NIDOTTE*, 4:499, outlines as follows:
 - A. Four empires and God's coming kingdom (ch. 2)
 - B. Trial by fire and God's deliverance (ch. 3)
 - C. A king warned, chastised, and delivered (ch. 4)
 - C'. A king warned, defiant, and deposed (ch. 5)
 - B'. Trial in the lions' den and God's deliverance (ch. 6)
 - A'. Four empires and God's everlasting kingdom (ch. 7)

Furthermore, the book as we have it is written in Aramaic and Hebrew, and the distribution of the two languages overlaps the distinct genres (with Aramaic in 2:4b-7:28, Hebrew in 1:1-2:4a and 8:1-12:13).

- 2. For a further explication of this point and an extended discussion of the warrior image, see T. Longman III and D. Reid, *God Is a Warrior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).
- 3. This describes the general argument of a perceptive commentator like J. Goldingay, Daniel (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1989).
- 4. See my study of ancient Near Eastern pseudonymity with an emphasis on royal autobiography; T. Longman III, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1991).
- 5. W. S. Towner, Daniel (Atlanta: John Knox, 1984).
- 6. On the other hand, there are other interpreters who do not feel a need to struggle with this issue because they do not believe the Bible is divine revelation by any definition of the term.
- 7. Baldwin has also strongly and clearly advocated a sixth-century date in her commentary (*Daniel*, TOTC [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1978).
- 8. J. Baldwin, "Theology of Daniel," *NIDOTTE*, 4:499.
- 9. For an excellent treatment of this issue, see B. Waltke, "Theonomy in Relation to Dispensational and Covenant Theologies," in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*, ed. by W. Barker and R. Godfrey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 59–87, and T. Longman III, "God's Law and Mosaic Punishments Today" (pp. 41–57 in the same volume).
- 10. My book *Reading the Bible with Heart and Mind* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1997) is an attempt to deal with this issue with the major genres of the Bible (history, law, wisdom, poetry, prophecy, gospel, epistle, and apocalyptic).
- 11. E. P. Clowney, Preaching and Biblical Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), develops this idea fully.
- 12. Following the warning given by J. H. Walton, L. D. Bailey, and C. Williford, "Bible-Based Curricula and the Crisis of Scriptural Authority," *Christian Education Journal* 13 (1993): 83–94.
- 13. S. Greidanus, Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1970) narrates a debate among Dutch interpreters and preachers that drove a wedge between moralistic preaching and "redemptive-historical" preaching. The issues and debate are instructive, but the conclusion we should reach is that it is a both/and solution, not an either/or.
- 14. As argued in T. Longman III, Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 70.



- 1. See discussion at Dan. 1:21 for the argument that Daniel's career actually stretched beyond Cyrus's first year.
- 2. Goldingay's attempt (*Daniel*, 4), based on studies by Van Selms, to connect the Hebrew spelling of the Babylonian king's Akkadian name [*Nabu-kudurri-usur* (Nabu protects the firstborn/boundary stone)] with an insulting etymology [*Nabu-kudanu-usur* ("Nabu protects the mule")] strikes me as overly speculative.
- 3. D. N. Fewell, Circle of Sovereignty: A Story of Stories in Daniel 1-6 (JSOTSup 72; Sheffield: Almond, 1988), 34.
- 4. 2 Kings 24:1–4 narrates a later conflict between Nebuchadnezzar and Jehoiakim. After initially yielding to the Babylonians (2 Chron. 36:6–7; Dan. 1:1–3), Jehoiakim rebelled against them three years later. Before Nebuchadnezzar could respond, Jehoiakim died, leaving his young son, Jehoiachin, on the throne, to face the onslaught, being exiled himself in 598 B.C.
- 5. J. A. Montgomery, *The Book of Daniel* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1927), 113, states "there is no historical corroboration of such an event in the third year of Jehoiakim."
- 6. See L. F. Hartman and A. A. DiLella, The Book of Daniel (AB; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1978), 48.

- 7. D. J. Wiseman, et al., Notes on Some Problems in the Book of Daniel (London: Tyndale, 1965), 16–18.
- 8. G. F. Hasel, "The Book of Daniel: Evidences Relating to Persons and Chronology," AUSS 19 (1981): 47-49.
- 9. Wiseman, Notes on Some Problems, 18.
- 10. D. J. Wiseman, Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), 17.
- 11. A. K. Grayson, Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1975), 99.
- 12. J. J. Collins, Daniel (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 131.
- 13. Wiseman, Nebuchadrezzar, 22.
- 14. See also the convenient summary of the period provided by T. R. Hobbs, 2 Kings (WBC; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1985), 348–49, though he passes over a siege of Jerusalem in 605, which may indicate that he does not accept Daniel 1:1–2 as reflecting historical reality.
- 15. Also in 605 B.C. Nabopolassar died, causing Nebuchadnezzar to quickly return to Babylon to secure the throne.
- 16. R. B. Dillard, 2 Chronicles (WBC; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987), 299.
- 17. The Hebrew text has Shinar, see NIV footnote. According to R. Zadok, "The Origin of the Name Shinar," ZA 74 (1984): 240–44, Shinar is an anachronistic reference to Babylonia. Goldingay (Daniel, 15), on the basis of other Old Testament usage (see particularly Genesis 11:1–9), argues that the term "suggests a place of false religion, self-will, and self-aggrandizement."
- 18. In an interesting article, P. R. Ackroyd, "The Temple Vessels—A Continuity Theme," in *Studies in the Religion of Ancient Israel* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), 166–79, describes the theological theme centered on the temple articles. To Ackroyd the text is not historical (esp. the reference in Dan. 1:2, cf. p. 180), but rather the removal and the restoration of the temple articles describes the continuity and discontinuity of Israel's relationship with God disrupted by the catastrophe of the Exile.
- 19. See 2 Kings 24:13; 25:13–17; Jer. 52:17–23.
- 20. Most commentators (see A. Lacocque, *The Book of Daniel* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1979], 21) recognize the Old Persian word for "inn" in his name, thus associating his name with his work of providing for the dining and lodging of the "school of the exiles." See also, Hartman and DiLella, *The Book of Daniel*, 129.
- 21. For instance, Rome had the practice of taking the children of other close relatives of client states and holding them "hostage." This practice was not punishment as much as security against rebellion. As these hostages lived in Rome, a high-ranking Roman family became their patron and they became acclimated to Roman ways, with the idea that they would be friends of Rome when they returned to their native lands. In the context of Daniel 11, we will note how this was also the experience of Antiochus IV and Demetrius.
- 22. J. L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 15–16. Berquist differentiates these urban exiles who worked in the government bureaucracy from the rural exiles, who helped in food supply.
- 23. Dan. 1:6 describes Daniel and his three friends as "some" among the exiles chosen for training. We hear nothing of the others; the text focuses only on Daniel and his three friends.
- 24. J. Braverman, Jerome's Commentary on Daniel: A Study of Comparative Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the Hebrew Bible (CBQMS 7; Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1978), 67–68.
- 25. Cf. V. P. Hamilton, "NIDOTTE, 2:457–58.
- 26. This is true especially in the light of the fact that Daniel lives through the entire exilic period. Many commentators cite Greek evidence that Persian education began in the early teens. L. J. Wood (*A Commentary on Daniel* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973], 33), for example, states: "Plato (*Alcibiades* 1.121) says that the education of youths in Persia began at fourteen years, and Xenophon (*Cyropaedia*, I.2) speaks of the seventeenth year as the completion"; see also J. A. Montgomery, *The Book of Daniel* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1927), 122. Of course, this Persian evidence, if reliable, is of uncertain relevance to Babylon decades earlier.
- 27. Cf. J. B. Pritchard (ed.), *The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969).
- 28. See, for instance, B. R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (2 vols.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 1993).
- 29. J. J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Vision of the Book of Daniel* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1977), 32 notes that Herodotus (5th century B.C.) provides the first attestation of the use of "Chaldean" in its professional sense.
- 30. Three of the most well-known series of omens from Mesopotamia are Enuma Anu Enlil, Summa Alu, and Summa Izbu.
- 31. Farber's article is found on pp. 1894–1906, in vol. 3 of J. Sasson (ed.), Civilizations of the Ancient Near East (New York: Scribers, 1995).
- 32. Although a learned discipline, Mesopotamian divination must be considered revelation from the divine realm according to J. Lawson, "The God Who Reveals Secrets': The Mesopotamian Background to Daniel 2:47," *JSOT* 74 (1997): 61–76. This point will be important not only here, but especially for the next chapter.
- 33. See Baldwin, *Daniel*, 81, citing Millard. Also note that Dan. 4:8 connects Daniel's new name with the name of Nebuchadnezzar's god.

- 34. Cf. Wood, A Commentary on Daniel, 36; Lacocque, The Book of Daniel, 29–30; E. J. Young, The Prophecy of Daniel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 43.
- 35. Braverman, Jerome's Commentary on Daniel, 53-71.
- 36. See G. H. Johnston, "プラウ," *NIDOTTE*, 3:293.
- 37. Cf. S. R. Miller, Daniel (NAC; Nashville: Broadman, 1994), 59.
- 38. Wood, A Commentary on Daniel, 36, cites this as a major motivation for Daniel.
- 39. Cf. R. E. Averbeck, "NIDOTTE, 1:794–96; see Ezra 2:62; Neh. 7:64; Isa. 59:3; Mal. 1:7, 12.
- 40. A. L. Oppenheim, Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964), 183–97.
- 41. See Baldwin, Daniel, 83; Fewell, Circle of Sovereignty, 40.
- 42. Cf. D. Soesilo, "Why Did Daniel Reject the King's Delicacies? (Daniel 1:8)," *BT* 45 (1994): 441–44. Note K. Koch, *Daniel* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1986), 58–69, who concludes the goal of Daniel's diet is to cause a mystical frame of mind.
- 43. As Calvin points out in his commentary on Daniel, *Daniel I (Chapters 1–6)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 30. This is implied by Dan. 10:3, in that the effect of the vision kept Daniel from enjoying his normal diet of choice food, meat, and wine. We should add that if Daniel's motivations in chapter 1 were to keep kosher, avoid idolatrous defilement, or political entanglement, then we should question why his eating habits changed later in life.
- 44. As pointed out by W. S. Towner, "Daniel 1 in the Context of the Canon," in *Canon, Theology and Old Testament Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs* (ed. G. M. Tucker, D. L. Petersen, and R. R. Wilson; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988), 288.
- 45. Literally, "ten times better" (see NIV). The number ten has the symbolic sense of "much" or "many"; cf. "Ten," in *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. by L. Ryken, J. Wilhoit, and T. Longman III (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, forthcoming).
- 46. Calvin, Daniel I, 27.
- 47. In the New Testament, God's use of pagan astrology to guide the wise men to the newly born Jesus may be an analogous situation (cf. Matt. 2:1–12).
- 48. Goldingay, Daniel, 27.
- 49. Cf. L. M. Wills, The Jew in the Court of the Foreign King (HDR; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 80.
- 50. Perhaps the intention of the verse is simply to say that Daniel was in the Babylonian court for the rest of its days. Or perhaps Young (*The Prophecy of Daniel*, 51–52) is correct when he argues that the first year of Cyrus is mentioned because of its importance for the Judeans and in effect means "first year and beyond."
- 51. J. Goldingay, "Story, Vision, Interpretation: Literary Approaches to Daniel," in *The Book of Daniel in the Light of New Findings*, ed. A. S. van der Woude (Leuven: University Press, 1993), 298.
- 52. See J. H. Walton, L. D. Bailey, and C. Williford, "Bible-Based Curricula and the Crisis of Scriptural Authority," *Journal of Christian Education* 13 (1993): 83–94.
- 53. See T. Longman III and R. B. Dillard, "Hermeneutics and Counseling," IBC Perspective 2 (1987): 21–30.
- 54. Though, to be sure, Paul's specific reference is to another historical account in the Old Testament, the story of wanderings in the desert.
- 55. Cf. T. Longman III, Literary Approaches, 68-71.
- 56. Cf. G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM, 1970), 47, who identified Daniel 1–6 as didactic narrative and compares it to the Joseph story. Cf. H.-P. Muller, "Die weisheitliche Lehrerzahlung im Alten Testament und seiner Umwelt," *WO* 9 (1977): 77–98.
- 57. J. Crenshaw, "Method in Determining Wisdom Influence Upon 'Historical Literature," *JBL* 88 (1969): 129–42, while not addressing the issue of Daniel 1–6 directly, does raise questions about assigning these chapters to a wisdom genre per se
- 58. D. Hudson, "Come, Bring Your Story," Mars Hill 1 (1994): 73–86.
- 59. Cf. V. Philips Long, The Art of Biblical History (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).
- 60. The term is Michael Novak's, cited by Ervin S. Duggan, "The Media and the Church Today," oral presentation at the Conference on Contemporary Issues at Westminster Theological Seminary (March 11, 1997), 3–6 in written transcripts.
- 61. J. D. Hunter, Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America (New York: Basic Books, 1991).
- 62. See the intriguing "behind the scenes" study of the religious antiabortion movement in J. Risen and J. L. Thomas, Wrath of Angels: The American Abortion War (New York: Basic Books, 1998).
- 63. See H. R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951). The five categories, only four of which I discuss here, are: (1) Christ Against Culture; (2) The Christ of Culture; (3) Christ Above Culture; (4) Christ and Culture in Paradox; (5) Christ the Transformer of Culture. I have also benefited from Philip Yancey's interaction with Niebuhr's material; see his "A State of Ungrace," *CT* 41 (February 3, 1997): 31–37. See also his *What's So Amazing about Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997).
- 64. See D. Allender and T. Longman III, Cry of the Soul (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993), 41-53.

- 65. This point is not made by Yancey and indeed the extent to which Cromwell's zeal for Protestantism led to the defacing of church art is a matter of debate since royalist propaganda certainly magnified his actions. See the cautious appraisal by A. Frasier, *Cromwell: The Lord Protector* (New York: Knopf, 1974), 102–5.
- 66. D. M. Lloyd-Jones, Faith on Trial (London: Inver-Varsity Fellowship, 1965), 63.
- 67. For a call to the church to practice civility in our interaction with others with whom we disagree, see R. J. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity, 1992).
- 68. For a stirring example of how urban churches in Boston have been agents of transformation in their community, see J. Klein; "In God They Trust," *The New Yorker* (June 16, 1997), 40–49.



- 1. These parallels have been frequently noted by commentators: for instance Towner, *Daniel*, 29–31; Goldingay, *Daniel*, 37, 39. There is also a parallel with the Aramaic tale of Ahikar. For parallels with both the Joseph story and Ahikar, see S. Niditch and R. Doran, "The Success Story of the Wise Courtier: A Formal Approach," *JBL* 96 (1977): 179–93.
- 2. Goldingay, Daniel, 36.
- 3. In "A Life-Style for the Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel," *JBL* 92 (1973): 211–23, though this endorsement does not imply agreement concerning his views on the historicity of the story.
- 4. J. Lawson, "The God Who Reveals Secrets': The Mesopotamian Background to Daniel 2:47," *JSOT* 74 (1997): 61–76, makes the important point that Mesopotamian divination is a result of divine revelation, a point denied by many Old Testament interpreters. His article argues that "divine revelation (the revelation of 'secrets') was more commonplace in Mesopotamian culture than in Judaean, and that Daniel, rather than appearing as a Judaean wise man or prophet, appears more in the mould of a Mesopotamian mantic sage" (p. 61). This point will be important for our use of this chapter in the Contemporary Significance section.
- 5. Information about omens and dream interpretation in Mesopotamia is helpfully summarized in an article about divination in volume 3 of J. Sasson, *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* (New York: Scribners, 1995).
- 6. All historians must grapple with the problem of gaps or apparent contradictions in their primary sources. Explanations that resolve the tension (harmonizations) are a common strategy of dealing with these issues. However, harmonizations are hypothetical constructions and are rarely certain. For an excellent treatment of harmonization as a method and a theological problem, see R. B. Dillard, "Harmonization: A Help and a Hindrance," in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutics*, ed. H. M. Conn (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 151–64.
- 7. Wood, A Commentary on Daniel, 48–50. Interestingly, D. Fewell, Circle of Sovereignty, 55, suggests that the fact that the king needs an introduction to Daniel, though the text refers to him as Belteshazzar, indicates that the scene is set within the period of training. However, the conclusion of the story throws this in doubt since Daniel/Belteshazzar does not return to training, but is immediately promoted. Fewell herself refers to this as a "tension" that "raises the question of the narrator's reliability" (62).
- 8. Young, *The Prophecy of Daniel*, 56. Young bases his views on an earlier suggestion by S. R. Driver, *The Book of Daniel* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1900), p. 17. This approach is rejected by J. J. Collins, *Daniel* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1993), 154–55.
- 9. See the interesting argument of J. H. Sims, "Daniel," in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, eds. L. Ryken and T. Longman III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 326–30, that Daniel's historical "inaccuracies' are an integral part of the book's literary technique."
- 10. As studied in the classic study by A. L. Oppenheim, *The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1956). See also footnote 4.
- 11. Goldingay, Daniel, 46, is content to leave it ambiguous.
- 12. Baldwin, *Daniel*, 87–88. The difference arises over a debate concerning the meaning of the word *azda*, which the NIV rightly takes as "firm," based on the supposition that it is a Persian loanword, as opposed to the KJV, which takes the word as derived from a Hebrew verb that means "to go away" (cf. discussion in Miller, *Daniel*, 81).
- 13. Also, it renders the continual pleading of the dream interpreters meaningless.
- 14. Young, The Prophecy of Daniel, 58-59.
- 15. So, W. S. Towner, "The Poetic Passages of Daniel 1–6," *CBQ* 31 (1969): 317; G. T. M. Prinsloo, "Two Poems in a Sea of Prose: The Content and Context of Daniel 2:20–23 and 6:27–28," *JSOT* 59 (1993): 96, who says "the poem has much in common with traditional Israelite poetry (cf. Job 12:13; Pss. 41:14; 106:48; 113:2; Neh. 9:5; Est. 1:13) and could be described as a psalm of thanksgiving with a hymnic character."
- 16. Daniel's prayer of thanks comes before we, as readers, are informed of the details of the answer. Thus, in the words of J. W. Watts, "Daniel's Praise (Daniel 2:20–23)," in *Psalm and Story: Inset Hymns in Hebrew Narrative* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992), 150, "Daniel's Praise [sic] becomes ... an expression of trust that the expected deliverance will be brought to fruition."

- 17. Calvin, *Daniel I*, 76–77.
- 18. Collins, Daniel, 162.
- 19. Detailed accounts may be found in G. F. Hasel, "The Four World Empires of Daniel 2 Against Its Near Eastern Environment," *JSOT* 12 (1979): 17–30; D. Flusser, "The Four Empires in the Fourth Sibyl and in the Book of Daniel," *IOS* 2 (1972): 148–75. See also E. C. Lucas, "The Origin of Daniel's Four Empires Scheme Re-Examined," *TynBul* 40 (1989): 185–202, who persuasively argues against the view that Daniel 2 derives from Persian apocalyptic imagery. Rather, he sees Daniel 2 and the Persian ideas as "independent adaptations" (201) of the earlier schema represented by Hesiod.
- 20. However, P. R. Davies, "Daniel Two," *JTS* 27 (1976): 399, argues that the different parts of the statue represent three successors of Nebuchadnezzar: Amel-Marduk, Neriglissar, and Nabonidus, while the rock stands for Cyrus.
- 21. Cf. Towner, *Daniel*, 115.
- 22. For instance, the marriage of Berenice to Antiochus II in 252 B.C. or Cleopatra to Ptolomy Epiphanes in 193–192 B.C. (cf. Collins, *Daniel*, 170).
- 23. R. J. M. Gurney, "The Four Kingdoms of Daniel 2 and 7," *Themelios* 2 (1977): 39–45; J. Walton, "The Four Kingdoms of Daniel," *JETS* 29 (1986): 25–36.
- 24. Miller, *Daniel*, 97, 99, represents a dispensationalist approach, which takes the ten toes as "kingdoms (or nations) of unequal strength will unite to form a coalition that will rise out of the ruins of the ancient Roman Empire." Most other interpreters, myself included, note that the text itself makes no symbolic interpretation of the number of toes.
- 25. Our view is close to that of Goldingay, *Daniel*, 58, but we do not share his views on the late dating of the book.
- 26. D. Wenham, "The Kingdom of God and Daniel," *ExpTim* 98 (1987): 132–34, persuasively argues that Dan. 2 and 7 provides "the primary background for the New Testament concept of the Kingdom of God."
- 27. Calvin, *Daniel I*, 97.
- 28. The account comes from Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 11.331–35, and is quoted in B. A. Mastin, "Daniel 2:46 and the Hellenistic World," *ZAW* 85 (1973): 87.
- 29. Noted by Calvin (*Daniel I*, 110) well before the current literary analysis: "We know many things were omitted in their narratives," which led him to suspend judgment as to Daniel's reaction.
- 30. Mastin, "Daniel 2:46," 85, though we are on less secure grounds arguing for this since Mastin believes the book was written in the Hellenistic period, and we are making the assumption that the practice was also current in the neo-Babylonian period.
- 31. See P. P. Zerafa, *The Wisdom of God in the Book of Job* (Rome: Herder, 1978); R. B. Dillard and T. Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 200–210.
- 32. See T. Longman III, The Book of Ecclesiastes (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).
- 33. For one of the best defenses of this viewpoint, see W. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1988).
- 34. The interested reader is urged to look at Grudem (ibid.) and R. Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), for opposing views on the subject.
- 35. D. Goleman, Emotional Intelligence (New York: Bantam, 1995).
- 36. Ibid., 34–36.
- 37. Ibid., xii.
- 38. Ibid., 34.
- 39. See L. Ryken, J. Wilhort, and T. Longman III, eds., *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downer Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998).
- 40. See Collins, Daniel, 171, who also points out that "the messianic interpretation is ... found in rabbinic literature."



- 1. The LXX felt the tension and filled in the gap by saying that this episode took place in the king's eighteenth year. This is likely an attempt to associate the ceremony with a celebration of his taking of Jerusalem (cf. Jer. 52:29) and is improbable.
- 2. A similar type of narrative occurs in Dan. 6, the account of Daniel in the lion's den. In ch. 11 we read a tale of court contest.
- 3. J. J. Collins, Daniel; First Maccabees; Second Maccabees, With an Excursus on the Apocalyptic Genre (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1981), 41.
- 4. For a translation of this material, see ibid., 38–39.

- 5. Dura is an Akkadian word meaning "wall" or "fortress" and "is common in the geographical nomenclature of Mesopotamia" (J. S. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1950], 197; cf. *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, vol. 10, p. x). We cannot be dogmatic about a specific location.
- 6. The Aramaic text reads the measurements in cubits: sixty cubits high and six cubits wide, reflecting the sexgesimal system in use in Babylon.
- 7. Young, *The Prophecy of Daniel*, 84, says that all Babylonian sculpture was grotesque, an expression of personal taste not shared by the present writer.
- 8. Wood, A Commentary on Daniel, 80.
- 9. Collins, Daniel, 180.
- 10. Also Wood, A Commentary on Daniel, 80.
- 11. Fewell, Circles of Sovereignty, 66.
- 12. Ibid., 68.
- 13. Wood, A Commentary on Daniel, 84.
- 14. See Lacocque, The Book of Daniel, 58, fn. 1.
- 15. A major debate surrounds the translation of this verse from the Aramaic. It is possible on grammatical grounds to defend the translation of the NRSV ("If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us"), but as many commentators have pointed out, this is unlikely from a theological perspective, and the NIV's translation is also philologically defensible (Miller, *Daniel*, 119). For a lengthy discussion of the issue, cf. P. Coxon, "Daniel 3:17: A Linguistic and Theological Problem," VT 26 (1976): 400–405.
- 16. For instance, Miller, Daniel, 115.
- 17. Young, The Prophecy of Daniel, 94, and most other conservative commentators argue strongly for this view.
- 18. I want to thank John Walton for this helpful point.
- 19. An excellent discussion may be found in A. L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964).
- 20. Perhaps similar to the way that icons of Mary and the saints are treated in some regions of the world.
- 21. Sophisticated Babylonians would not have strictly identified the idol with their god.
- 22. I would like to thank John Walton for his insightful comments on this topic expressed in this paragraph.
- 23. See the phrase used throughout P. Tillich, Systematic Theology (3 vols.; Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1951–1963).
- 24. Towner, Daniel, 54.
- 25. V. Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy (3d ed.; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984),
- 26. See D. Allender and T. Longman III, Bold Purpose (forthcoming Tyndale House, 1998).
- 27. F. Nietzsche, "Upon the Blessed Isles," *Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Second Part*, quoted from W. Kaufmann (ed.), *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking, 1968), 199–200.
- 28. Thus Spoke Zarathustra, 196, quoted in B. Ingraffia, Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), 96.
- 29. It is true we are created in the image of God, but we only reflect the glory of God in a derivative manner. For a further discussion, see D. Allender and T. Longman III, *Intimate Allies* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1995), 28–41.
- 30. I am indebted to Towner, Daniel, 51, for the discussion and Scripture texts quoted in this paragraph.
- 31. Calvin, *Daniel I*, 143.



- 1. Grammatically, this expression is ambiguous and could be translated "the spirit of the (holy) God" with reference to Yahweh, but Nebuchadnezzar's use of such a phrase at this stage of the story would be strange. See B. Becking, "A Divine Spirit Is in You': Notes on the Translation of the Phrase *ruah* **lahim* in Daniel 5,14 and Related Texts," in *The Book of Daniel in the Light of New Findings (Leuven: University Press, 1993), 515–19.
- 2. N. W. Porteus, *Daniel: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), 65, rightly argues the pivotal nature of Dan. 4:25 in the chapter.
- 3. Note that Dan. 2:4b-7:28 is written in Aramaic rather than in Hebrew.
- 4. See the discussion in Collins, Daniel, 221.
- A helpful discussion may be found in Collins, *Daniel*, 217–18. The Prayer of Nabonidus was first published in 1956 by J. T. Milik; cf. F. M. Cross, "Fragments of the Prayer of Nabonidus," *IEJ* 34 (1984): 260–64.

- 6. Eusebius refers to this as the book of Abydenus, "Concerning the Assyrians"; cf. Collins, *Daniel*, 218–19, who gives a translation of the text.
- 7. Fewell, Circle of Sovereignty, 89.
- 8. Porteous, *Daniel*, 67, points out that Nebuchadnezzar's language, particularly in Dan. 4:3, is similar to that found in the hymns of the Psalter (esp. Ps. 145:13).
- 9. Cf. Collins, Daniel, 22; Longman, Fictional Akkadian Autobiography.
- 10. S. Parpola, "The Assyrian Tree of Life: Tracing the Origins of Jewish Monotheism and Greek Philosophy," *JNES* 52 (1993): 167.
- 11. Ibid., 167-68.
- 12. Though there it usually refers to evil or fallen angels, cf. the Book of the Watchers (I Enoch 1–36).
- 13. A helpful discussion may be found in P. Coxon, "The Great Tree of Daniel 4," in *A Word in Season*, J. D. Martin and P. R. Davies, eds. (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986), for the argument that the seven periods are symbolic rather than indicative of any specific time indicator (94), and for the assertion that the bands are of cultic significance (105).
- 14. M. Roaf, *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East* (New York: Facts on File, 1990), 192–93. Of course, Herodotus's report would be a century after Nebuchadnezzar, but the city's opulence was at its height under Nebuchadnezzar. Indeed, he built the Hanging Gardens for his Median queen since she was used to hilly forests, not the flat plain on which Babylon was built.
- 15. Calvin, Daniel I, 189-90.
- 16. Many scholars (cf. Young, *The Prophecy of Daniel*, 112; Baldwin, *Daniel*, 109) diagnose Nebuchadnezzar's illness as boathronpy or lycanthropy, where a human being thinks himself or herself as an ox, dog, or wolf. According to Baldwin, it is rarely seen today because the mentally ill are less likely to be allowed to roam the countryside.

John Walton in a personal communication has drawn my attention to the fact that the description of Nebuchadnezzar's "symptoms" is not very different from common Mesopotamian descriptions of those who are outside of civilization. Enkidu in the Gilgamesh Epic, Ahiqar in exile, the citizens of destroyed cities in city laments, Lugalbanda when abandoned by his companions—all are described in beast-like terms. Nebuchadnezzar considered himself the founder of Babylonian civilization, and he was driven out of it.

- 17. Fewell, Circle of Sovereignty, 101.
- 18. See above, pp. 26-27.
- 19. Christianity Today 41 (September 1, 1997): 70–71, 86–87.
- 20. See P. Coxon, "Another Look at Nebuchadnezzar's Madness," in *The Book of Daniel in the Light of New Findings*, ed. A. S. van der Woude (Leuven: University Press, 1993), 211–21.
- 21. We will reserve further discussion of this topic until the later chapters of Daniel, as the book's focus turns from the stories centered in foreign courts to an account of Daniel's vision of the future. G. K. Beale's point that Christ's title in Rev. 17:14 has its origin in Daniel 4:37 is relevant here. He argues that "by the application of this title to Christ, the author may view God's sovereign humbling of the King of Babylon in Dan 4 as a typological prophecy of Christ's sovereign defeat of the end-time foe who is closely associated with eschatological Babylon" (see "The Origin of the Title 'King of Kings and Lord of Lords' in Revelation 17.14," NTS 31 (1985): 620.
- 22. For a helpful examination of false shame, see L. B. Smedes, *Shame and Grace: Healing the Shame We Don't Deserve* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).
- 23. The quote from Heb. 12:2 and the concluding paragraph are taken from D. B. Allender and T. Longman III, *Cry of the Soul* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993), 209; see chapters 14 and 15 for a more extensive discussion of the destructive power and redeeming possibilities of shame.



- 1. See her discussion in Fewell, Circle of Sovereignty, 114–16, 138–39.
- 2. Though doubt is still entertained by some concerning the way Belshazzar is described in Dan. 5, cf. J. J. Collins, *Daniel With an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 68.
- 3. For more on the story as well as the actual documentation concerning Belshazzar's role, see the excellent book by P.-A. Beaulieu, *The Reign of Nabonidus, King of Babylon 556–539 B.C.* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1989). An earlier helpful treatment from an apologetic point of view is M. J. Gruenthaner, "The Last King of Babylon," *CBQ* 11 (1949): 406–25. For a more popular treatment, see A. Millard, "Daniel and Belshazzar in History," *BAR* 11 (1985): 73–78
- 4. See for instance, Collins, Daniel With an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature, 68.
- 5. For a comprehensive discussion of his issue, consult Miller, *Daniel*, 149–50.
- 6. See K. Jobes, Esther (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).

- 7. Goldingay, Daniel, 106-7.
- 8. So Fewell, Circle of Sovereignty, 124.
- 9. Though by having them removed from the temple and allowing nonpriestly hands touch them, he was guilty of profaning them himself.
- 10. Miller, *Daniel*, 154, makes this point and believes it is possible.
- 11. So A. Wolters, "Untying the King's Knots: Physiology and Wordplay in Daniel 5," JBL 110 (1991): 117–22.
- 12. See Miller, Daniel, 155, citing R. Koldewey, The Excavations at Babylon (London: Macmillan, 1914).
- 13. So Lacocque, The Book of Daniel, 94.
- 14. Though Gruenthaner, "The Last King of Babylon," 421, argues that the expression really means a high official, not specifically the third most powerful.
- 15. See Longman, Fictional Akkadian Autobiography, 158-61; also see Beaulieu, The Reign of Nabonidus, 68-79.
- 16. See Collins, Daniel, 248.
- 17. Fewell, Circle of Sovereignty, 124.
- 18. Calvin, Daniel I, 222.
- 19. Ibid., 223.
- 20. See Miller, *Daniel*, 165, where he argues, I think unnecessarily and unpersuasively, that they really are verbs, not nouns, and the strange forms may be explained by accents (see Collins, *Daniel*, 250–52; Goldingay, *Daniel*, 110–11, who both cite an earlier study by C. Clermont-Ganneau, "Mane, thecel, phares et le festin de Balthasar," *JA* 8 [1886]: 36–67, and argue that the oracle had an earlier form and meaning, though Goldingay places the importance on the interpretation offered in the book by Daniel himself).
- 21. Towner, Daniel, 76.
- 22. Goldingay, Daniel, p. 111.
- 23. A. Wolters, "The Riddle of the Scales in Daniel 5," HUCA 62 (1991): 155.
- 24. Ibid.
- 25. M. Hilton, "Babel Revisited—Daniel 5," JSOT 66 (1995): 99–112.
- 26. See V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).
- 27. R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 114–30; A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), 99–101.
- 28. We should also bring into view the culmination of God's judgment. Though we cannot see his judgment displayed consistently in the present world—the wicked sometimes prosper and the righteous sometimes perish—we know that an ultimate day of reckoning is coming. The Bible clearly teaches that those who rebel will receive what they deserve if they do not turn to Christ. This will become clearer in the last part of the book of Daniel, so we will develop the theme of judgment later.
- 29. I have tried to take a first step in this regard in "Reading the Bible Postmodernly," *Mars Hill Review* (forthcoming in Fall, 1998).
- 30. As done recently by C. Bartholomew, "Reading the Old Testament in Postmodern Times," TynBul 49 (1998): 91-114.
- 31. D. J. A. Clines, "A World Established on Water (Psalm 24): Reader-Response, Deconstruction and Bespoke Criticism," in *The New Literary Criticism*, ed. J. Cheryl Exum and D. J. A. Clines (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1993), 79–90.



- For a detailed discussion of the issue and a presentation of the preferred solution, see R. B. Dillard and T. Longman III, An Introduction to the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 334–37.
- 2. J. C. Whitcomb, Darius the Mede: A Study in Historical Identification (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959).
- 3. D. J. Wiseman, et al. Notes on Some Problems in the Book of Daniel (London: Tyndale, 1965), 12-16.
- W. H. Shea, "An Unrecognized Vassal King of Babylon in the Early Achaemenid Period," AUSS 9 (1971): 51–67, 99– 128; 10 (1972): 88–117.
- 5. Goldingay, Daniel, 122; Fewell, Circle of Sovereignty, 143.
- 6. T. A. Boogaart, "Daniel 6: A Tale of Two Empires," The Reformed Review 39-40 (1985-1987): 107.
- 7. For evidence that "satrap" can be used on a smaller scale, see Collins, *Daniel*, 264, though Collins himself still believes there is a confusion here with the later Darius.
- 8. At least symbolically, since it lasts only thirty days.
- 9. Fewell, Circle of Sovereignty, 145.

- 10. Ibid., 146.
- 11. J. Walton, "The Decree of Darius the Mede in Daniel 6," JETS 31 (1988): 280.
- 12. The statement that the law of the Persians and Medes was unable to be repealed has been debated and discussed, but the same theme may be found in the book of Esther (Esth. 1:19; 8:8) as well as the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus (17.30). Further, paragraph 5 of Hammurapi's law code indicates that it was a crime for a judge to change his decision (cf. Hartman and DiLella, *The Book of Daniel*, 199).
- 13. Collins, Daniel, 268.
- 14. Cf. Fewell, Circle of Sovereignty, 150.
- 15. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "The Judicial Ordeal in the Ancient Near East" (Ph.D. dissertation: New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1977).
- 16. Though it is possible to understand events like the Flood or the crossing of the Red Sea as an ordeal in which the innocent survive and the guilty are killed.
- 17. Fewell, Circle of Sovereignty, 154.
- 18. Cf. pp.57-61.
- 19. Cf. pp. 26-27.
- 20. See P. D. Miller Jr., Sin and Judgment in the Prophets (Chico, Calif.: Scholars, 1982).
- 21. Taken from personal conversations with Bob Fu and an article summarizing Bob and Heidi's story in C. Jones, "House Church Leader Granted Asylum in the USA," *China Prayer Letter and Ministry Report* 144 (November–December 1997): 1–5.
- 22. Towner, Daniel, 85.
- 23. Towner, Daniel, 84–85; Goldingay, Daniel, 136.



- 1. We should note, however, that certain characteristics link the two sections (see Introduction). For instance, Daniel 7 is in the Aramaic language as are chapters 2–6. Hebrew begins again with chapter 8. Also, the four-kingdom scheme of Daniel's vision in the present chapter reminds us of Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the statue in chapter 2.
- 2. For more on apocalyptic literature in the Bible, see T. Longman III, *Reading the Bible with Heart and Mind* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1997), 213–26; *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1991), 166–90.
- 3. Miller, Daniel, 195.
- 4. Goldingay, Daniel, 139, supported by G. Hasel, "The First and Third Years of Belshazzar (Dan. 7:1; 8:1)," AUSS 15 (1976): 153-68.
- See J. Day, God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975); C. Kloos, Yhwh's
 Combat with the Sea: A Canaanite Tradition in the Religion of Ancient Israel (Leiden: Brill, 1986); M. K. Wakeman,
 God's Battle with the Monster: A Study in Biblical Imagery (Leiden: Brill, 1973).
- 6. W. G. Lambert, "A New Look at the Babylonian Background of Genesis," *JTS* 16 (1968): 287–300, warns that Mesopotamian conceptions of creation probably changed over the period of more than a millennium, in which Akkadian was the *lingua franca* of the Near East; but the *Enuma Elish* certainly reflects the majority opinion of Marduk priesthood, which was dominant during those times when the city of Babylon was the central power of the region.
- The text may be found most conveniently in ANET, 60–72. For more recent translations, consult B. R. Foster, Before the Muses (Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 1993), 354–402; W. W. Hallo, ed., The Context of Scripture (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 390–402.
- 8. It may be found in *ANET*, 129–42; also M. D. Coogan, *Stories from Ancient Canaan* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 75–115.
- 9. T. Jacobsen, "The Battle Between Marduk and Tiamat," *JAOS* 88 (1968): 104–8, has persuasively argued that the myth originated among Northwest Semites like the Canaanites and then was adopted by the Mesopotamians.
- 10. The text is broken after the defeat of Yam, but most scholars believe that the lost portion may have recounted creation.
- 11. See T. Longman III and D. Reid, God Is a Warrior (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 64-69.
- 12. M. Roaf, *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East* (New York: Facts on File, 1990), provides a picture of a Mesopotamian winged bull with a human head (163) and a winged lion with eagles' feet and horns (196–97).
- 13. We saw in ch. 1 how Daniel would have been aware of these texts.
- 14. P. A. Porter, Metaphors and Monsters: A Literary-Critical Study of Daniel 7 and 8 (ConBOT 20; Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1983).
- 15. Such as E. J. Young, The Prophecy of Daniel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 275–94.

- 16. For the classic exposition of a "critical" approach to this imagery, see H. H. Rowley, *Darius the Mede and the Four World Empires in the Book of Daniel* (San Diego, Calif.: Cardiff, 1935). But two evangelicals have also made a persuasive case for this approach as well: R. J. M. Gurney, *God in Control: An Exposition of the Prophecies of Daniel* (Worthing: Walter, 1980); J. H. Walton, "The Four Kingdoms of Daniel," *JETS* 29 (1986): 25–36.
- 17. See pp. 81–83 for arguments for and against both of these approaches.
- 18. Cf. the convoluted arguments of someone like Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), who sees in the European Common Market (now the European Union) as the fulfillment of the ten horns of Daniel 7.
- 19. R. J. M. Gurney, "The Four Kingdoms of Daniel 2 and 7," Themelios 2 (1977): 43.
- 20. Walton, "The Four Kingdoms of Daniel," 30.
- 21. So Gurney, "Kingdoms," 43–44.
- 22. Goldingay, Daniel, 164-65; Collins, Daniel, 303.
- 23. See ANET, 134.
- 24. For an excellent concise discussion of the issue, see Collins, Daniel, 313-17.
- 25. Cf. V. S. Poythress, "The Holy Ones of the Most High in Daniel vii," VT 26 (1976): 208–13.
- 26. Of course, most advocates of this approach argue that this is failed prophecy, which leads to later reinterpretation. See R. P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed: Cognitive Dissonance in the Prophetic Traditions of the Old Testament* (New York: Seabury, 1979). Such a view is unacceptable to those who believe that Daniel is a divinely inspired prophet.
- 27. Note the highly symbolic nature of the numbers in this section, "four" and "ten"; cf. *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998).
- 28. Miller, *Daniel*, p. 215, for instance, comments "the Hebrew equivalent of this phrase occurs in 12:7 and is taken to approximate the 1,290 days of 12:11 and the 1,335 days of 12:12, both of which are just over three and a half years." But the point is that they are "over" not the same.
- 29. So Lacocque, The Book of Daniel, 153-54.
- 30. See C. F. Keil, Ezekiel, Daniel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975 [reprint]), 242-45.
- 31. December 15, 1997 (pp. 62–71).
- 32. Lindsey, The Late Great Planet Earth (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).
- 33. J. Walvoord, *Armageddon, Oil, and the Mid-East Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974 [revised 1991]); C. Dyer, *The Rise of Babylon* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1991).
- 34. H. Camping, 1994? (New York: Vantage, 1992).
- 35. For a fuller description of my approach to apocalyptic, see "What I Mean by Historical-Grammatical Exegesis—Why I Am Not a Literalist," *GTJ* 11 (1990): 37–55.
- 36. C. Plantinga Jr, Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 16.
- 37. See the works by W. Wink, Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992); Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); When the Powers Fall: Reconciliation in the Healing of Nations (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998); R. Mouw, Politics and the Biblical Drama (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976).
- 38. G. Steiner, *No Passion Spent* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1996), 235. For a Christian assessment, see the powerful work by M. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).
- 39. G. K. Beale, The Use of Daniel in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature and in the Revelation of St. John (Washington, D.C.: Univ. Press of America, 1984).
- 40. M. Kreft, "The Influence of the 'Holy War' Motif on Pauline Theology" (Th.M. thesis: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1985); D. Allender and T. Longman III, *Bold Love* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991).
- 41. See comments on Daniel 1.



- 1. In an interesting study contributing to the history of interpretation of the apocalyptic portions of Daniel, S. Nunez (*The Vision of Daniel 8: Interpretations from 1700 to 1800* [Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews Univ. Press, 1987]), in his description of a host of interpreters in the period covered by his research, demonstrates the wide-ranging agreement on the interpretation of the imagery of chapter 8. This is not without exception, however, as our comments on the 2300 evenings and mornings will show.
- 2. Collins, Daniel, 329-30, reminds us that animals also represent leaders and nations in the Animal Apocalypse of 1 Enoch.

- 3. G. Hasel, "The First and Third Years of Belshazzar (Dan. 7:1; 8:1)," AUSS 15 (1976): 153ff.
- 4. Josephus, Antiquities, 10.11.7; G. Archer, "Daniel," EBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 101.
- 5. Susa was a little over two hundred miles east of Babylon.
- 6. Collins, Daniel, 329.
- 7. Towner, Daniel, 116, cf. the comments of E. Yamauchi, Persia and the Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 292–93, relevant to the existence of Susa during the neo-Babylonian period. Indeed, he states that "Susa was occupied continuously from 3500 B.C. to the thirteenth century A.D." (283).
- 8. See discussion on p. 189.
- 9. So Miller, Daniel, 227.
- 10. So Young, The Prophecy of Daniel, 172.
- 11. P. J. Els. "NIDOTTE, 3:733–35.
- 12. The Hebrew literally says that the voice came from "between the Ulai" (8:16).
- 13. Gabriel is the first angel to be named in the Bible. He appears again in the New Testament to announce ahead of time the great acts of redemption about to take place (cf. Luke 1:19, 26).
- 14. Wood, A Commentary on Daniel, 223–24.
- 15. In the words of Keil, "Time of the end' is the general prophetic expression for the time which, as the period of fulfillment, lies at the end of the existing prophetic horizon—in the present case the time of Antiochus," quoted in Miller, *Daniel*, 231.
- 16. The argument has been made by many scholars that the specific symbolism of the ram and the goat originate in the zodiac. The argument is primarily based on the writings of a first century A.D. author named Teucer, who places Persia under the sign of the ram and Syria under the sign of the goat. Collins, *Daniel*, 330, raises doubts about the approach, however, by pointing to the late date of this information (even assuming a middle second century B.C. date for the prophecy as he does) and also by the fact that the goat is the sign for Syria, not Greece.
- 17. Actually, Alexander was not born until two months after Alexander the Great's death. Herakles's claim to the throne was likely a hoax.
- 18. As argued by Goldingay, Daniel, 213.
- 19. See pages 178-79.
- 20. H. Camping, 1994? (New York: Vantage, 1993).
- 21. See S. D. O'Leary, Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994).
- 22. See the argument by J. Doukhan, *Daniel: The Vision of the End* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews Univ. Press, 1987). In the midst of my critical comment on Adventist origins I want to be quick to point out that there is much of great value in the teachings of the Adventist church and that some of the best Old Testament scholars today are Adventist.
- 23. See the insightful comments of A. Hoekema, The Bible and the Future (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).
- 24. A surprising number of them whose name in some fashion spells out 666, from Nero on.



- 1. See the discussion on pages 157–59. If Darius is not the Babylonian throne name for Cyrus, he is likely ruling at the behest of this Persian emperor.
- 2. As in Hartman and DiLella, The Book of Daniel, 245-46.
- 3. Towner, Daniel, 129-39.
- 4. M. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); J. Niehaus, *God at Sinai* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).
- 5. For instance, Collins, Daniel, 348.
- 6. R. E. Winkle, "Jeremiah's Seventy Weeks for Babylon: A Reassessment, Part II: The Historical Data," *AUSS* 25 (1987): 289–99, is an unsuccessful attempt to place the start at events in 609 B.C.
- 7. "Numbers," in The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998).
- 8. W. L. Holladay, Jeremiah I: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 668–69.
- 9. Towner, Daniel, 130.
- 10. Or perhaps, as suggested in the previous paragraph, the seventy "sevens" are seen as prolonging the just completed seventy-year Exile.
- 11. Collins, Daniel, 353.

- 12. A close reading shows an ambiguous relationship between the first seven "sevens" and the next sixty-two. The NIV (see also the NJB and NLT) reads the two periods together as stretching from the decree to the appearance of the Anointed One, motivated no doubt in part by a desire to associate the Anointed One with Christ. Other versions and interpreters understand the two periods as separate, with the Anointed One appearing after the first seven "sevens" (cf. NRSV; REB; NAB).
- 13. Several ancient Near Eastern treaties may be found in English translation in ANET, 201-6, 529-35.
- 14. O. P. Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 271.
- 15. Ibid., 276.
- 16. From O. P. Robertson, The Christ of the Covenants (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 62.
- 17. For further discussion, see T. Longman III, *Reading the Bible with Heart and Mind* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1997), 113–28.
- 18. A helpful discussion may be found in B. K. Waltke, "Theonomy in Relation to Dispensational and Covenant Theologies," *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* ed. W. Barker and R. Godfrey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 59–87.
- 19. As Wink, When the Powers Fall, 18, puts it: "We can repent, in fact, precisely because God has already forgiven us."
- 20. J. Miller and B. Miller Juliani, Come Back, Barbara, 2d ed. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997).
- 21. Wink, When the Powers Fall, 14.



- 1. For a brief discussion of the potential conflict between this date and the note that Daniel remained in Babylon until the first year of Cyrus, see comments on Dan. 1:21. It is true that the LXX has "first year of Cyrus," but as Hartman and DiLella point out (*The Book of Daniel*, 262), this is likely an attempt to harmonize the two references.
- 2. For discussion of the meaning and significance of this name, see comments on chapter 1.
- 3. It is interesting to note that this time overlaps the observance of Passover and the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, which took place from the fourteenth day to the twenty-first day of the first month (Num. 28:16–25).
- 4. The "great river" in the Bible was usually the Euphrates, which marked the lower boundary of Mesopotamia (cf. Gen. 15:18; Deut. 1:7; Josh. 1:4, etc.). The Tigris, marking the upper boundary of Mesopotamia, is mentioned twice in the Bible (cf. also Gen. 2:14), only here being described as "the great river." Daniel's exact location on the Tigris is not given, but the general location situates him away from the city of Babylon (which is on the Euphrates).
- 5. C. Rowland, The Open Heaven (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 99.
- 6. Towner, Daniel, 152.
- 7. Cf. also Dan. 9:23; 10:19.
- 8. Today, the ultraorthodox Jewish community sometimes goes by the name <code>haredi</code> ("tremblers"), one source of their name being this chapter in Daniel. Another name for the same group is <code>hasidim</code>, from the Hebrew word <code>hesed</code>, which means "covenant lovingkindness."
- 9. Young, The Prophecy of Daniel, 225.
- 10. Miller, Daniel, 281-82.
- 11. Calvin, *Daniel 7–12*, 252; cf. W. H. Shea, "Wrestling With the Prince of Persia: A Study on Daniel 10," *AUSS* 21 (1983): 235.
- 12. Here we side, as do the majority of modern scholars, with the reading found in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the LXX (the NIV footnote). The Hebrew Masoretic text, represented in the main text in the NIV, is likely the result of scribal nervousness over the theology represented by the original text. In other words, in the light of Israel's later repeated apostasies, the scribes may have worried that the verse sounded too close to the polytheism that so tempted Israel.
- 13. This also shows that the conflict is not just about the response to Daniel's prayer.
- 14. As Miller, *Daniel*, 286–87, points out: "'In the future' is a translation of the Hebrew *be'aharit hayyamim*, usually rendered 'in the latter days.' Normally the phrase describes events that will recur just prior to and including the coming of the kingdom of God upon the earth...." If this were clearly the case, it would provide a strong argument supporting the argument that the latter parts of chapter 11 refer to the future Antichrist. However, as Collins points out (*Daniel*, 161), that is not clearly the case, since the Hebrew phrase can refer to "a definitive change in the future but not to an end of history."
- 15. For a much fuller discussion, see T. Longman III and D. Reid, God Is a Warrior (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).
- 16. For this reason, some, like R. Smend (Yahweh War and Tribal Confederation [Nashville: Abingdon, 1970]), prefer the term "Yahweh war."
- 17. T. Longman III, "Psalm 98: A Divine Warrior Victory Song," JETS 27 (1984): 267-74.
- 18. W. Moran, "The End of the Unholy War and the Anti-Exodus," Bib 44 (1963): 333-42.

- 19. Genesis 3 and Daniel 10 are not the only texts in the Old Testament where the cosmic battle is described. In many of the texts where God is seen locked in combat with the sea or Leviathan (see comments on Dan. 7:2), we may well have allusion to spiritual realities (cf. Ps. 18:14–15; 24:1–2; 29:10; 74:12–17; Isa. 27:1; Nah. 1:4a). For more, consult chapter 5, "God Wars Against the Forces of Chaos," in Reid and Longman, *God Is a Warrior* (72–82).
- 20. K. Sempangi, A Distant Grief (Glendale, Calif.: Regal Books, 1979).
- 21. Differences abound among those who advocate this brand of spiritual warfare. A helpful introduction to the topic, written by supporters like George Otis Jr., Cindy Jacobs, Kjell Sjoberg, and Victor Lorenzo, has been edited by C. P. Wagner, *Breaking Strongholds in Your City: How to Use Spiritual Mapping to Make Your Prayers More Strategic, Effective and Targeted* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 1993).
- 22. C. Arnold, Three Crucial Questions About Spiritual Warfare (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).
- 23. Ibid., 161.



- 1. Cf. A. K. Grayson, *Babylonian Historical-Literary Texts* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1975). For the fullest discussion of this text (and other similar Akkadian texts) and its connections to Daniel, see T. Longman III, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1991), 131–95.
- 2. See Goldingay, Daniel, 282–86, who uses the term quasi-prophecy to describe this literary phenomenon.
- 3. Ibid., 310–12.
- 4. Goldingay strengthens his argument with an appeal to the work of S. Niditch, "The Visionary," in *Ideal Figures in Ancient Judaism*, ed. by J. J. Collins and G. W. Nickelsburg (Chicago: Scholars, 1980), 153–79, who asserts, on the basis of comparative anthropological evidence, that the author of the book of Daniel actually had an experience through which he identified with that historical character.
- 5. Especially vol. 7, part 1, *The Hellenistic World*, ed. F. W. Walbank; A. E. Astin, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984).
- 6. There were thirteen rulers (a few of which, like Smerdis [522], Xerxes III [424], Sogianos [424–423], ruled only a very short time) of Persia in all; cf. E. M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990) for a helpful survey of the period.
- 7. Miller, Daniel, 291.
- 8. See S. Mandell and J. Hayes, *A History of the Jews From the Hellenistic Through the Early Roman Eras (333 BCE–135 CE)* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1998), 30.
- See S. R. Driver, The Book of Daniel (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1900), 170, and J. S. Montgomery, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1927), 437, plus discussion in Collins, Daniel, 379.
- 10. H. Heinen, "The Syrian-Egyptian Wars and the New Kingdoms of Asia Minor," *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 7, part 1, 436–39.
- 11. Collins, Daniel, 380.
- 12. Ibid., 382.
- 13. Miller, Daniel, 298–99, following Calvin.
- 14. So Goldingay, Daniel, 299-300.
- 15. See Mandell and Hayes, A History of the Jews, 51-54.
- 16. Ibid., 58.
- 17. Ibid., 65, though Mandell and Hayes think this may be an "ideological fiction," since it was not mentioned in 2 Maccabees.
- 18. R. J. Clifford, "History and Myth in Daniel 10-12," BASOR 220 (1975): 23-26.
- 19. Most notably, Goldingay, Daniel; D. G. Meade, Pseudonymity and Canon (Tübingen: J. C. Mohr, 1986).
- 20. See here T. Longman III, Fictional Akkadian Autobiography.
- 21. Baldwin, Daniel, 198-201.
- 22. A. Hoekema, The Bible and the Future (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).
- 23. This word is used for the first time in the letters of John (see 1 John 2:18).
- 24. See also Ezek. 28:1–19. This arrogance is anticipated in the horn that speaks arrogant words against God (Dan. 7:8, 11, 25; 8:9–12).
- 25. J. Lindenberger, "Daniel 12:1-4," Interp 39 (1985): 182.
- 26. G. W. E. Nickelsburg Jr., *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1972), 11.

- 27. Towner, *Daniel*, 166. This view is widely held, though Goldingay (*Daniel*, 308) doubts it, asserting that it has a "thisworldly connotation."
- 28. Miller, Daniel, 320.
- 29. Collins, Daniel, 399.
- 30. Baldwin, *Daniel*, 208, adds the intriguing observation that it would be historically incorrect to say that Antiochus broke the power of the people of God (12:7). This suggests to her that something more than the second century B.C. is hinted at here.
- 31. Other scholars, who adopt a second-century B.C. date for this section of Daniel, suggest that the reference is exclusively to the period of Antiochus and that we are dealing with failed prophetic expectation. They point out that since the Maccabees actually cleansed the temple within three years, even the shorter three-and-a-half-year date, meant that the "Danielic" party had something else in mind for fulfillment, perhaps the resurrection of the martyrs. When that did not happen after three and a half years, they suggested 1290 days. Then when that failed to be the period for fulfillment, they tacked on a few more days to get the 1335 days. This is ingenious given their presupposition and the fact that this is often how modern apocalyptic speculation works; but how likely is it that a written text would be updated in such a short time? Mention should also be made of the fact that there were a number of different calendars in use during the second century B.C.—a solar calendar, a lunar calendar and a luni-solar calendar (for details, see Goldingay, *Daniel*, 309–10). Such an observation does not clarify things as much as complicates them, that is, makes the references even more enigmatic to us and most likely to the original audience.
- 32. Goldingay, *Daniel*, 314–16.
- 33. Towner, *Daniel*, 175.
- 34. For Ecclesiastes, see T. Longman III, The Book of Ecclesiastes (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).
- 35. See the treatment of this psalm on pp. 124–26.
- 36. Cf. T. Longman III and D. Reid, God Is a Warrior; see discussion above on pp. 254–56.
- 37. Towner, *Daniel*, 148.
- 38. Goldingay, Daniel, 316.
- 39. Ibid., 319.
- 40. See R. van Leeuwen, "Wealth and Poverty: System and Contradiction in Proverbs," *Hebrew Studies* 33 (1992): 25–36, who isolates a small number of proverbs in the book that recognize the complicated nature of retribution.
- 41. For how this passage and the overall teaching of the Teacher fits into the book of Ecclesiastes and the theology of the canon, please see the introduction in Longman, *Ecclesiastes*.
- 42. As Collins argues in his helpful excursus "On Resurrection," *Daniel*, 394–98.
- 43. For an interpretation of this passage and for an explanation how such a bleak view fits into the message of the Bible as a whole, see Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, in loc.
- 44. J. Wilson, Gospel Virtues (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998) provides an excellent description of these two worldviews.
- 45. F. Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in the Extra-Moral Sense," in Walter Kaufmann, ed., *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking, 1968), 46.
- 46. A. C. Thiselton, Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 5.